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ICONOSTASIS

Introduction: The Spiritual Structure of Dreams

In the beginning of Genesis—"God created the heavens and the earth"—we have always recognized as basic this division of all creation into two. Just so, when we pray the Apostles' Creed, we name God as "Maker of all things visible and invisible." These two worlds—the visible and the invisible—are intimately connected, but their reciprocal differences are so immense that the inescapable question arises: what is their boundary? Their boundary separates them; yet, simultaneously, it joins them. How do we understand this boundary?

Here, as in any difficult metaphysical question, the best starting point always is what we already know in ourselves. The life of our own psyche, yes *our own soul's life,* is the truest basis upon which we may learn about this boundary between the two worlds. For within ourselves, life in the visible world alternates with life in the invisible, and thus we experience moments—sometimes brief, sometimes extraordinarily fleeting, sometimes even the tiniest atom of time—when the two worlds grow so very near in us that we can see their intimate touching. At such fleeting moments in us, the veil of visibility is torn apart, and through that tear—that break we are still conscious of at that moment—we can sense that the invisible world (still unearthly, still invisible) *is breathing:* and that both this and another world are dissolving into each other. Our life in such moments becomes an unceasing stream in the same way that air when warmed streams upward from the heat.

Dream: this is our first and simplest (in the sense that we are fully habituated to it) entry into the invisible world. This entry is, more often than not, the lowest. Yet even the most chaotic and crude dream leads our soul into the invisible, giving even to the least sensitive of us the insight that there is something in us very different from what we uniquely call life. And we know this, too: when we stand on the threshold between sleep and waking, when we stand at the boundary between the two worlds, our soul is engulfed with dreams.

We need not prove the point. Long ago it was shown that our deepest sleep—what we call sleep itself—is wholly without dreaming. It is only when we sleep lightly at the boundary between sleep and waking that we are in the time—more precisely, in the temporal *environment*—where dream images are born. One understanding (and it is almost right) says that dream images correspond to the immediate passage from one area of psychic activity to another. And as we begin to awaken, we begin to transpose these dream images into daylight consciousness where they can unfold in the temporal sequence of our visible world. But, taken in themselves, these dream images have a unique, incomparable time, a time that cannot be measured in the terms of the visible world, a "transcendental" time. Let us recall a brief proof.

"The sleep was brief but the dream was long": such is the simple formula of dream images. We all know this. We sleep for, say, a brief few minutes—yet in those few minutes, we pass through days, months, even years, sometimes even centuries and millennia. There can be no doubt whatever about this: sleeping is sealed off from the visible world. Thus, a dreamer passes into another system, another dimension, another measure wherein time is understood and experienced in ways completely unlike the ways of time in the visible world. In this new experience of time,

the dreamer's time, compared to time in the visible world, runs at infinite speed.

Many would agree, then, even with knowing nothing whatever about the principle of relativity, that in different dimensions there is different time and it moves in different speeds and different measures. Few have sufficiently considered, however, the infinite speed of the dream-time, the time that turns inside out, the time that flows backward. For, indeed, very long sequences of visible time can, in the dream, be wholly instantaneous—and can flow from future to past, from effects to causes. This happens in our dreams precisely when we are moving from the visible world to the invisible, between the actual and the imaginary.

The first understanding of instantaneous time was advanced by Baron Carl Duprel. A young man at the time, he took the first important steps in the right direction, the most substantial step being the articulation of the *fact* of it. But the even more substantial discovery—that time flows backwards as well as forwards—he failed to make. He approached this discovery; but he grew always more and more uncertain; he finally did not comprehend the invisible that lay before him.

We can schematize our understanding of dreams this way. We all know the dreams—we have had them times beyond all counting (though we have never reflected upon them deeply enough)—when some tiny external stimulus causes the dreams. A sharp noise, or other sound, a loudly spoken word, a blanket that has slipped away, a sudden odor, a ray of light, and so on: anything whatever can provoke a sequence of dream images. It might be wise, then, to recognize that all dreams are externally caused. But to this recognition (or assertion) we rarely compare the composition of the actual dream. Most often, we do not even attend to the dream's content, letting our inattentiveness be fed by the opinion that dreams are empty and unworthy of consideration and thought. But even the most "occasional" of dreams is, in

fact, constructed on quite different lines. Let us look at such a construction.

We dream (let us say) a sequence of persons, places and events whose *causal linkages* reside not in some 'deep comprehension' of those persons, places and events but, instead, are found in the empirical surfaces of the dream. We plainly understand, in the dream, how one event causes another, and how (possibly quite absurdly) two or more events are connected because the first one is causing the next ones to occur; moreover, as the dream unfolds for us, we see plainly how the whole chain of causation is leading toward some conclusive event, some *denouement* to the dream's entire system of cause-effect. Let us call this conclusive event X; and let us say, too, that X occurred because of some previous event T, which, in turn, was caused by S, whose cause was R, and so on: going from effect to cause, from latter to prior, from present to past, until we arrive at the dream's starting point, some usually quite insignificant, even meaningless event A: and it is this event A that is understood *in the dream* as the first cause of the entire system. But what about the tiny external stimulus, the quick sharp noise, the brief ray of light? To waking consciousness, this external stimulus is the cause of the whole composition: the cause, that is, of the whole causally interlocked system in which persons, places and events arose in the dream. Let us call this external cause Ω.

Now, what makes the dreamer awaken? When we look at this question from the viewpoint of waking consciousness, we might want to say that it is Ω (the noise or the light) that awakens us. From within the dream, however, it is plainly the conclusive dream event X—the *denouement*—that, precisely because it ends the dream, awakens us. Taken together, we can see that Ω and X almost perfectly coincide in such a way that the *dreamed-content* and the *wakened-cause* are one and the same. This coincidence is usually so exact that we never even wonder about the relation of X

and Ω: the *denouement* is unquestionably a 'dream-paraphrase' of some external stimulus invading our dream from without.

For example, I dream that a pistol shot goes off, and in the room near me someone is really shot, or somebody has slammed a door. So there is no doubt that the dream was accidental; of course the pistol shot in the dream is a spiritual echo of a shot in the outer world. The two shots are, if you wish, the double perception—by the dreaming ear and by the sober ear—of one and the same physical process. If in a dream I should see a multitude of fragrant flowers at the very moment someone puts a bottle of perfume under my nose, then once more it would be wholly unnatural to think that the coincidence of the two fragrances (the flowers' fragrance in the dream and the perfume's in the world) is accidental. Or I dream that someone falls upon me and begins to strangle me, and I awake in terror to find that a pillow has fallen on my chest. Or I dream I am attacked by a dog, and I awake the find that a mosquito has bitten me. There are uncountable thousands of such instances; in all of them, the coincidence of X and Ω—of, again, the dream's *denouement* and its external cause—is under no circumstances an accidental coincidence.

But note what we are saying: the same event is being differently seen by two consciousness: by waking consciousness, it is Ω, while by dream consciousness, it is X. This would scarcely be worth our notice at all except for the extraordinary fact that X has a contradictory double status: in waking consciousness, it is a dream effect of external cause Ω while, in the dream, it is the final effect of the dream's strongly welded causal chain begun by trivial event A. Thus, X concludes two entirely distinct lines of causation, lines whose respective starting points (the external noise and dream event A) have no connection whatever: plainly, Ω cannot in any sense *cause* A to occur. But we can say that if A and all its chain of circumstances did not exist, then the whole dream would

not occur, and consequently there would be no X—which means that Ω did not reach our consciousness.

Thus, while X is a reflection of Ω in the imagery of the dream, it is clearly not some *deus ex machina* with no connection to the dream's logic of events, some alien intruder who senselessly terminates the stream of inner imagery. No, X is a true *denouement*: it genuinely concludes the dream. In dreams, events do not happen the way people who are insensitive to God's providence think they happen, as the train crash or the pistol shot terminates the promising life. In dreams, everything happens as in a perfect drama, and the *denouement* comes because all the prior events of the dream have fully ripened and because it therefore fulfills and unifies the dream's entire drama and meaning. The dream *denouement* is therefore not some independent event glued from the outside onto the dream's causal chain; in some unfathomable way, it never interrupts the dream's logic and shape and whole pattern of interlocked details. A dream is unquestionably a complete truth, a self-enclosed coherence, in which the *denouement* is predetermined from the very start in such a way that we may say that the end determines both the beginning and everything that occurs between the beginning and the end. A dream, in other words, is wholly coherent; it cannot be sundered anywhere without destroying it entirely. Just as is always the case with the well-written play, where a plot without its conclusive consequences lacks all significance, so we may say that the composition of the dream is teleological: its events occur because of its *denouement*, in such a way that the *denouement* will not be left hanging in the air but will, instead, exhibit deep programmatic rationality.

Let us look at some dreams. Here are those dreams that stem from the same external stimulus, the ringing of an alarm clock (these are Gilderbrand's observations).

1.

It's a spring morning and I'm going for a walk through green meadows, and I come to the neighboring village. I see the villagers dressed in Sunday clothes, carrying their prayerbooks, a big crowd of them all heading for the church. Today is Sunday and Divine Liturgy will soon begin. I decide to go to Liturgy but I'm a bit warm from walking, so I decide first to rest in the cemetery next to the church. I start to read the epitaphs, and then I notice the bell ringer start to go up the bell tower. The bell must be rung to start the service, but it still hangs unmoving. Then the bell begins to sway and suddenly it peals out in loud, piercing sounds—so piercing, in fact, that I awake to find that the piercing sound is my alarm clock ringing.

2.

It's a clear winter day, and the streets are covered with snow. I've promised to go on a sleigh ride, but I have to wait a long time. Then I'm told that the sleigh is ready at the gate. I make ready to leave—I put on my heavy fur coat; a footbag is taken out—and at last I sit down in the sleigh. But there's more waiting now, until finally the impatient horses are given the reins. The sleigh bells on the reins start trembling with their famous "yanichar" music; they ring out louder and ever more vigorously—until the dream tears open and I find that the strong sound of sleigh bells is my alarm clock ringing.

3.

I see the kitchen maid going down the hallway to the dining room, and she's carrying a stack of two or three dozen porcelain plates. I sense that the stack is tipping out of her hands. "Watch out," I cry. "The whole load will fall." She argues back—inevitably. "It's not the first time I've carried plates, you know. I'm used to it." But I'm keeping an anxious eye on her as she goes to the dining room. On the threshold she trips, and all the dishes fall from her hands, cracking and ringing out in hundreds of flying

pieces. But the sound keeps on, and it's not the dishes crashing but the sound—I'm now awake—of my alarm clock ringing.

Let us take one more example, a famous one in the psychology texts. In this one, the dreamer experiences the French Revolution, participating in the very beginnings of the Revolution and—for over a year inside the dream—goes through a long, complicated series of adventures: persecution, pursuit, terror, the execution of the King, and so on. Finally, the dreamer is arrested with the Girondists, thrown into prison, interrogated, and then condemned by the Revolutionary Council to die. The wagon rolls through the streets to the guillotine, and he is taken from the wagon and his head is firmly placed on the headrest, and then the guillotine blade falls heavily onto his neck: and he awakens in horror.

It is the final event that interests us: the touch of the blade on his neck. Can anyone doubt this: that the whole dream sequence, from the first stirrings of Revolution to the conclusive fall of the guillotine blade, is one seamless whole? Doesn't the entire chain direct itself precisely to that conclusive event (touch of cold steel) that we termed X? To doubt this total, interlocked coherence is to deny the very dream itself—an improbable supposition.

And yet the dreamer found, in the moment of his terrified awakening, that the metal bedstead of his bed had somehow broken and had heavily struck his bare neck. We cannot doubt the coherent wholeness of his dream, a coherence that starts from the Revolution's first stirrings (A) and concludes with the guillotine blade falling (X). Equally, we cannot doubt that the sensation of the blade (X) and the touch of bedstead metal (Ω) are the very same event: but perceived by two distinct orders of consciousness, dream and wakened.

None of this would, I repeat, be at all extraordinary if the touch of the bedstead (Ω) had awakened the sleeper and, in the instant of this awakening, the touch had been enfolded by the symbolic image of the touch, and if this symbolic image (amplified by thematic associations with the French Revolution) had unfolded into a dream of sufficient length. But in actual fact this dream, as with countless others of the same type, flows reversely to what we expect when we think in the Kantian sense of time. We say that the external cause (Ω) of the dream (which is a single, coherent unit) is the touch of the bedstead on the dreamer's neck, and that this touch is symbolized by the image of the guillotine blade's touch (X). Hence, the spiritual cause of the whole dream is this event X. Thus, in daylight consciousness and according to the scheme of daylight causation, this event must precede A, which spiritually flows from this event X. In other words, in the time of the daylight world, event X should be the start of the dream's drama and event A its *denouement*. But here, in the time of the invisible world, it happens inside out, and cause X appears not prior to all the consequences of A and (in general) not prior to the entire series of consequences (b, c, d...r, s, t) but following them, concluding the whole row and determining it not as its efficient cause but its final cause: τέλος.

Thus, time in the dream runs, and acceleratedly runs, towards the actual and *against* the movement of time in waking consciousness. Dream time is *turned inside out,* which means that all its concrete images are also turned inside out with it: and that means we have entered the domain of *imaginary space.* The very same event that is perceived from the area of actual space as actual is seen from the area of imaginary space as imaginary, i.e., as occurring before everything else in teleological time, as the goal or object of our purposiveness. Contrarily, the goal seen from here appears (in our failure to appreciate goals rightly) as something cherished but lacking the energy of the ideal; but seen from *there,* through the other consciousness, the goal is comprehended as living energy that shapes actuality as its creative form. So, in general, runs the inner time of organic life, the flow of which is diverted from consequences to cause-goal. But usually this inner time only very dimly reaches our waking consciousness.

A person I knew very well once dreamed (after the death of close relatives) that he was walking along a cemetery, and the other world seemed to him dark and gloomy. But all at once the deceased in the cemetery—or perhaps he himself somehow understood (I don't remember how)—explained to him how very wrong such a thought was; for, directly beneath the surface of the earth, foliage was growing but with its roots up, not down, so that the same green and succulent foliage and grass were there, just as in the cemetery—but even more green and succulent; and the same trees were there, and their great crowns grew down and their roots reached up, and the same birds sang in the same azure sky where the same sun shone—all of it more radiantly beautiful than in our world on this side.

Don't we recognize in this reverse world, in this ontological mirror reflection of our world, the sphere of the imaginary, an imaginary which is nevertheless actual for one who is oneself turned upside down, who reaches into the world's spiritual density—an imaginary truly real in the way one is oneself real? Yes, this realm is real in essence—and not in a way completely different from the reality of our world, for whatever God creates is blessed into unity; rather what the journeyer to the other side sees and what the deceased also contemplates is the same existence as here. The true countenances and spiritual forms of things are seen by one who has himself realized his own true, original countenance, that countenance which is the image of God (and the Greek for which is ἰδέα); for the ideas of the Existing One *see,* having been themselves illumined by the Idea, and thereby in and through themselves they reveal to our world here the ideas of the supreme world.

And so dreams are the images that separate the visible world from the invisible—and at the same time join them. This boundary-space of the dream establishes the relationship of the dream images to this world as well as to *that* world. From the perspective

of the visible world and its ordinary images (i.e., what we call 'actuality'), a dream is 'merely a dream,' nothing—*nihil visible,* yes *nihil,* but *visible* nothing, visible and perceptible and therefore always approaching the images of *this* 'actuality.' But time in the dream—i.e. its most general characteristic—runs *reversely* to time in the visible world. And therefore although it is something perceived, the dream is wholly teleological, saturated with the meanings of the invisible world, meanings that are invisible, immaterial, eternal yet nevertheless visibly manifest and (as it were) vividly material. A dream is therefore pure meaning wrapped in the thinnest membrane of materiality; it is almost wholly a phenomenon of the other world. The dream is the common limit of both the sequence of earthly states and the sequence of heavenly states, the boundary where the final determinations of earth meet the increasing densifications of heaven. The dream makes into symbols this meeting of the lowest experiences of the highest world with the highest experiences of the lowest world; thus, the dream is the last splashes of the higher world into the lower—although the perceptible patterns of these heavenly splashes are predetermined by our earthly circumstances. For this reason, the kind and quality of our dreaming changes through a night of sleeping. Early on, our dreams are primarily psycho-physiological in kind, gathering imagery from everyday waking experience (usually immediate); later on, and especially toward dawn, our dreams are cleansed of such empirical obsessions and, filled with night-consciousness, grow ever more mystically purified.

A dream, then, is a sign of a movement between two realms—and also a symbol: of what? From the heavenly view, the dream symbolizes earth; from the earthly perspective, it symbolizes heaven. A dream therefore occurs when—simultaneously but with differing orders of clarity—both shores of existence are given to consciousness. We might say, then, that a dream happens whenever we cross from one shore to the other: but it may be more accurate to say that

the dream happens whenever our consciousness *hugs the boundary of the crossing* and therefore sustains the double perceptiveness that occurs whenever we either lightly dream or drowsily keep awake. For there is where all significant dreaming occurs: in the light dream or in the sudden separation from ordinary waking reality. There are, it is true, other possible phenomena of the invisible realm. But for such phenomena to occur in us, it is necessary that some powerful inward shock take place, some essential separation of oneself from oneself—as if we were to be plunged into some twilight of consciousness wherein we would wander the borders of the two worlds but would lack the power to penetrate deeper into either one.

Spiritual Sobriety and the Iconic Face

What we say about the dream holds true (with minor changes) about any movement from one sphere to another. In creating a work of art, the psyche or soul of the artist ascends from the earthly realm into the heavenly; there, free of all images, the soul is fed in contemplation by the essences of the highest realm, knowing the permanent *noumena* of things; then, satiated with this knowing, it descends again to the earthly realm. And precisely at the boundary between the two worlds, the soul's spiritual knowledge assumes the shapes of symbolic imagery: and it is these images that make permanent the work of art. Art is thus materialized dream, separated from the ordinary consciousness of waking life.

In this separation, there are two moments that yield, in the artwork, two types of imagery: the moment of ascent into the heavenly realm, and the moment of descent into the earthly world. At the crossing of the boundary into the upper world, the soul sheds—like outworn clothes—the images of our everyday emptiness, the psychic effluvia that cannot find a place above, those elements of our being that are not spiritually grounded. At

the point of descent and re-entry, on the other hand, the images are experiences of mystical life crystallized out on the boundary of two worlds. Thus, an artist misunderstands (and so causes us to misunderstand) when he puts into his art those images that come to him during the uprushing of his inspiration—if, that is, it is only the imagery of the soul's ascent. We need, instead, his early morning dreams, those dreams that carry the coolness of the eternal azure. The other imagery is merely psychic raw material, no matter how powerfully it affects him (and us), no matter how artistically and tastefully developed in the artwork. Once we understand this difference, we can easily distinguish the 'moment' of an artistic image: the descending image, even if incoherently motivated in the work, is nevertheless abundantly teleological; hence, it is a crystal of time in an imaginal space. The image of ascent, on the other hand, even if bursting with artistic coherence, is merely a mechanism constructed in accordance with the moment of its psychic genesis. When we pass from ordinary reality into the imaginal space, naturalism generates imaginary portrayals whose similarity to everyday life creates an empty image of the real. The opposite art—symbolism—born of the descent, incarnates in real images the experience of the highest realm; hence, this imagery—which is symbolic imagery—attains a *super-reality.*

What is true of art and dream is also true of mystical experience: a common pattern holds everywhere. In mystical experience, the soul is raised up from the visible realm to where visibility itself vanishes and the field of the invisible opens: such is the Dionysian sundering of the bonds of the visible. And after soaring up into the invisible, the soul descends again into the visible—and then and there, before its very eyes, are those real *appearances* of things: ideas. This is the Apollonian perspective on the spiritual world.

How tempting it is to call 'spiritual' those images—those soul-confusing, soul-absorbing, soul-consuming dreamings—that first appear to us when our soul finds its way into the other world.

Such images are, in fact, the spirits of the present age that seek to trap our consciousness in *their* realm. These spirits inhabit the boundary between the worlds; and though they are earthly in nature, they take on the appearances of the spiritual realm. When we approach the limits of the ordinary world, we enter into conditions that (like the ordinary) are continuously new but that have patterns which differ entirely from those of ordinary existence. Here, then, is the area of our greatest spiritual danger: to approach this boundary while still willing earthly attachments; or to approach it without a spiritual mind—either one's own or a spiritual director's; or to approach it before we are, in the spiritual sense, truly grown-up. What happens, at such an encounter of the boundary, is that the seeker is engulfed in lies and self-deceptions. The world then ensnares the seeker in that net of temptation in which—by granting him an apparent entry into the spiritual realm—it actually enslaves him to the world. For it is not at all the case that every spirit guarding these points of entry is a true Guardian of the Threshold, i.e., a good defender of the sacred realms; for a spirit may well be not a genuine being of the higher realm but rather an accomplice of (in the Apostle's phrase) "the prince of the power of the air"; for such spirits are the ones who keep the soul on the boundary of the worlds, tangled in the seductions of spiritual intoxication.

A day of spiritual sobriety, when it holds our soul in its power, is so sharply different from the spiritual realm that it cannot even pretend to be seductive, and its materiality is experienced not only as a burden but also as a yoke good for us in the way gravity is good for earth, a yoke restricting our movements but giving us a fulcrum, a yoke reining in the swiftness with which our will acts in self-determination (for both good and bad) and in general extending in the will its instant of the eternal, i.e., the will's angelic self-determination toward this side or that, an instant lasting our whole life and making our earthy life not an empty existence passively manifesting every possibility but, rather, the

ascetic exercise of authentic self-organization, the art of sculpting and 'chasing out' our essence. This lot, or fate, or destiny, εἱμαρμένη, μοῖρα, i.e., that which was decided from above, *fatum* from *fari*—this destiny of our simultaneous weakness and strength, this gift of our divine creativity, is *time-space.*

Time-space sobriety on earth is never seductive, then; neither is the angelic realm when the soul comes directly into contact with it. But in between, at the boundary of this world, are concentrated all the temptations and seductions: these are the phantoms that Tasso depicts in describing the Enchanted Wood. If one only possesses the spiritual steadfastness of will to go through them, neither fearful of nor yielding to their seductions, then one finds that they will lose entirely their power over the soul, becoming mere shadows of sensuality, empty dreamings of no value at all. But if, instead, one's faith in God weakens in the midst of such a spiritual siege, then one looks back at these phantoms—and in so doing, one pours the reality of one's own soul into them. Then the phantoms will gain great power, seizing the soul and sucking from her the power to materialize still more, thereby weakening the soul into further fear and more yielding. In such a state, it is extremely difficult—almost impossible—to break their grip without the intervention of another spiritual power. Such, then, are the elemental swamps at the boundary of the worlds.

This disastrous enslavement is called by the ascetic tradition *prelest*: it means spiritual pride or conceit, and it is the direst spiritual state a person can be in. In committing any other sin, a person acts in such a way that he falls into a relation with the external world, with its objective properties and laws, within which he is working against the sacred order of God's creation, hitting against and striving to break it. Thus, an ordinary sinner can discover in this relation the fulcrum to change his conscious-

ness and bring repentance (*to repent* in Greek is μετανοεῖν, to change the totality of consciousness at the deepest level of being).

Prelest, however, is entirely different. Here, the deluded self does not seek superficial satisfaction of this or that passion; but—far more dangerously—it imagines itself to be moving along the perpendicular to the sensory world, withdrawn from it. Thus completely unsatisfied, the self-absorbed soul in *prelest* is held by the spirits who inhabit the boundary and who are, then, nourished by the soul's own troubled, unsatisfied passions—that soul already burning with the fires of Hell. The soul closes into itself, and then all occasion is gone wherein the soul could—with intense agony—awaken once more into consciousness: the encounter with the objective world of God's creation.

Prelest, of course, brings images that stir passions in us. But our real danger lies not in the passions but in our appraisal of them. For we may, if caught in *prelest*, take the passions as something directly opposite to what they really are. Usually, we would see our sinful passions as a dangerous weakness, thereby finding the humility that heals us of them. In *prelest*-stirred passions, however, we see them as attained spirituality, as sacred energy, salvation, and holiness. Thus, where ordinarily we would seek to break the grip of our sinful passions—even if our attempts were weak and futile—in *prelest*, driven by spiritual conceit, spiritual sensuality, and (above all) spiritual pride, we seek to tighten the knots that bind us. An ordinary sinner knows he is falling away from God; a soul in *prelest* thinks it is drawing ever closer to Him, and while angering Him thinks he is gladdening Him.

Such disastrous confusion occurs in us because we confuse the images of ascent with the images of descent. We may put the whole matter this way: the vision that appears to us on the boundary of the worlds may be either (1) the absence of the reality of the visible world; that is, an incomprehensible sign of our own inner emptiness, our own *prelest*-impassioned banishing of God's

objective reality; and then, inhabiting the neat, empty room of our soul, we will find those masks of reality that are the total renunciation of the real world; or the vision may be (2) the presence of the superior reality of the spiritual world.

In this sense, then, ascetic self-purification also has for us the same double significance. When spiritual neatness becomes an end in itself, then Pharisaic self-consciousness arises and, inevitably, self-admiration. In such asceticism, the soul becomes empty and, freeing itself from all earthly attachments, grows still emptier; then, finding this growing emptiness ever more intolerable, one's nature invites into the emptiness those spiritual forces that prompted the whole Pharisaic practice of self-purification in the first place, those greedy, twisted, and radically impure forces. Our Savior talks precisely of such self-centered asceticism in His parable about the swept room:

> When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first. (Matthew 12:43-45)

Thus, what was self-consciously intended issues finally in its direct opposite. This occurs because the man assures himself and others that he himself, in his innermost heart, is really good—that all his mistakes and transgressions are somehow accidents, mere phenomena and not essentialities, things that somehow just happened; and that all he spiritually needs to do is to tidy up the room a bit. Such a man is wholly desensitized to his own radically flawed will, inevitably seeing his actions as arising from outside God and solely from his own efforts; hence, he exhibits the complacency of spiritual self-satisfaction.

But if you continually acknowledge your own sinfulness, you never have the time to think whether or not you—in your own

eyes—are spiritually 'tidied up'; instead, your soul hungers and thirsts for God, trembling in fear at the spiritual catastrophe of being without Him; and thus your one real concern becomes no longer yourself but that which is the most objective of all: God; and what you genuinely now want is not a clean inner room to congratulate yourself about but—in tears—for God to visit the room of your soul, this even hastily picked up place, God who can with a word transform a tiny hut, even a hovel, into a splendid palace chamber. With this direction to your inward life, a vision will come to you not when, by your own will, you are attempting to override the given boundaries of your spiritual growth, exceeding the measure of what is open to you; instead, it will come when—mysteriously, incomprehensibly—your soul has been lifted into the invisible world by the very powers of that world itself, and then (like the rainbow after the divine deluge, like "the sign of the covenant") the heavenly vision will appear in your soul, the visible image of the highest realm, given to you as both reminder and the revelatory 'news' of eternity and as teacher of the way to incarnate the invisible in the daylight consciousness of your entire life. Such a vision is more objective than the objectivities of earth, far weightier and realer than they, for it is the fulcrum of all our earthly creativity, the crystal wherein—conformed to its own crystalline laws—is crystallized out our earthly experience, thereby becoming in its total structure a symbol of the spiritual world.

The ontological opposition between these two types of vision—between those arising from our emptiness and those born of our fullness—may be best expressed by the opposition between the words *mask* (Russian: *lichina*) and countenance (*lik*). But there is also the word *face* (*litzo*): so let us begin with it. By *face* (*litzo*), we mean that which we see in ordinary daylight consciousness, that which we see as the recognizable appearance of the real world; and we can speak—doing no violence to ordinary language—of all natural things and creations with whom we are in

conscious relation as having a face: as, for example, we speak of the face of nature. Face, we may thus say, is nearly synonymous with the word *appearance*—meaning, however, *appearance to daylight consciousness*. But in saying this, we must not deprive the word *face* of all objective reality; rather, we must see in *face* a boundary between subjectivity and objectivity, a boundary whose clear distinction is never given to our consciousness, a boundary whose fading away causes in us the perceptual circumstance wherein we know for certain that we are perceiving something but we do not know what precisely, in the thing we are seeing, is objectively real. In other words, when we see a *face*, we see its objective reality only (as it were) hiddenly, as if it were organically absorbing our consciousness and thereby subconsciously forming in us the basis for a further process of knowing. In this sense, a *face* is the perceptual raw material upon which the portrait-artist is now working but whose esthetic details are, at the moment, still unfinished. Once completed, the *face* becomes (using the language of literary criticism) an artistic image, a perceptual portrait that is not the ideal form but is, instead, one that is simultaneously typical and relative.

Thus, this perceptual portrait that we fashion is, of course, a quick sketch, one of many possible sketches for depicting the face we are seeing; however, in the *face* itself, our sketch is no more expressed than are all other possible sketches; and, in this sense, our sketch is something external to the *face* itself, revealing at least as much if not more its own artistic self-determination, and the artist's own cognitive organization, as it does the ontological reality of the *face* itself.

On the other hand, the *countenance* (*lik*) of a thing manifests its ontological reality. In *Genesis, the image of God* is differentiated from *the likeness of God*; and long ago, the Holy Tradition of the Church explained that the *image of God* must be understood as the ontologically actual gift of God, as the spiritual ground of

each created person; whereas the *likeness of God* must be understood as the potentiality to attain spiritual perfection: that is, to construct the *likeness of God* in ourselves from that totality of our empirical personalities called the *image of God*, to incarnate in the flesh of our personality the hidden inheritance of our sacred likeness to God: and to reveal this incarnation in our *face* (*litzo*). Thus, our *face* gains the precision of a spiritual structure quite different from our ordinary face; but this difference is, in turn, quite distinct from our face as an artistic image or portrait—not, however, due to any motivation of our own (i.e., our face's 'composition' or 'tone' or 'character'); rather, this difference is due to the material reality of our face conforming to the deepest tasks of its own essence. Everything accidental, everything caused by things external to this essence—i.e., everything in our face which is not the face itself—is swept away by an energy like a strong fountain of water breaking through a thick material husk, the energy of the image of God: and our *face* (*litzo*) becomes a *countenance* (*lik*).

We are beholding a countenance, then, whenever we have before us a face that has fully realized within itself its likeness to God: and we then rightly say, Here is the image of God, meaning: Here is depicted the prototype of Him. When we contemplate this holy countenance, we thus behold the divine prototype; for those among us who have transfigured their faces into countenances proclaim—without a word and solely by their appearance to us—the mysteries of the invisible world. In Greek, we remember, *countenance* is called εἶδος or ἰδέα (i.e., idea), for ἰδέα is precisely the meaning of countenance: the idea of revealed spiritual being, eternal meaning contemplatively apprehended, the supreme heavenly beauty of a precise reality, the highest prototype, the ray from the source of all images: such are the meanings of idea in Plato; and from him, they spread to all philosophy and theology and even into the popular understanding of the word

'idea'. From all these meanings we gather and make wholly transparent our understanding of *countenance*.

The absolute opposite of *countenance* (*lik*) is *mask* (*lichina*). The first meaning of mask may be seen in the old word "larve" (related to modern *larva*), meaning that which resembles a face, being both presented and accepted as a face but which is empty inside; that is, it has physical materiality but no metaphysical substance. By contrast, a countenance is the *appearance* of some reality and, as such, it mediates between our act of comprehending and that which we comprehend in the sense that it opens for our speculative sight the essence of that which we are seeking to comprehend. Thus, if the countenance did not so function, it could not have for us any meaning. But this meaning would become negative if, instead of revealing to us the image of God, the countenance gave us not merely no hint of it but also actively lied to us, falsely pointing to non-existent things. Then the countenance would be not a face but a mask.

In using the term *mask*, we shall ignore entirely the ancient religious meanings of masks as well as all the corresponding classical terms *larve*, *persona* and *prosopon* (and so on), because in the ancient classical cultures, the masks were less masks in our understanding of the term and more a type of icon. But when the ancient religions became corrupted and spiritually drained, and the cultic icons became correspondingly profaned, then from this blasphemy there arose the modern meanings of the mask: deceptive illusion, spiritual fraudulence, and even the triviality of scariness.

Significantly, the Latin term *larva* had already, in the ancient Roman culture, acquired the meaning of *astral corpse*, "empty" (*inanis*) or "substance-less," that which is left after death: that is, the *larva* or *astral mask* as the dark, impersonal vampire who seeks its sustenance in fastening onto a living face and sucking out all the blood from it, showing forth the face's essence as its own. It is remarkable how even quite different traditions use the very same

terms to express this false reality of the astral mask: in the Kabbalah, it is called the *klipot* (the husk), while in Theosophy it is termed the "shell." And it is most remarkable that this emptiness of the false reality, this kernel of the shell, is the basis in folk wisdom for the quality or attribute termed "impure" and "evil." Thus, in both German and Russian fairy tales, we see the evil spirit who is inwardly empty, a hollow tube *without a backbone* (hence, without the physical basis of bodily strength), a false body who is consequently a false entity. Also, we see in Egyptian folk tradition the god who imitates reality and goodness, i.e., the god Osirus, depicted by the hieroglyph *Dzedu,* whose ideogramic meaning is the backbone. Evil or impure spirits, however, in lacking backbone, lack substance; hence, the substantial and the good, because they possess backbone, have the very basis of being.

Such interconnections might seem to us quite arbitrary—until we recall the work of positivist philosopher Ernst Mach. He at first rejected the notion that the human personality possessed a philosophically substantive kernel or core. But he saw that the idea persisted and thrived everywhere in human societies; hence, as an intellectually honest seeker of knowledge, he recognized the necessity of finding the empirical basis of that idea. And he found it exactly in that part of the human body which is inaccessible to outward interactions and which cannot be directly seen: in, that is, the back and its structural determination, *the backbone.* Thus, a rigorous empiricism led this archpositivist to the very starting point of German psychology: to, that is, the miraculous fairy tales of Caesarius of Heisterbach (1170-1240), in *Dialogus Miraculorum* (Dialogue on Miracles, 1223).

In the most general terms, then, the evil and impure has no authentic substance. Only the good, and everything which acts by it, is real. Medieval thought called the devil "the monkey of God"; hence, because the first Satanic temptation was "to be as gods"—that is, to be a god not substantively but deceptively—it is wholly

accurate to talk not about a monkey but about sin: about, that is, the mask, the illusory semblance of reality emptied of all essence and strength. The essence of a human being is the image of God. Thus, in penetrating the entire structure ("the temple," in the Apostle's terms) of a human personality, sin acts not only to block the outward expression or appearance of a person's essence but also to hide the very essence itself. In such a case, the expressed appearance of the personality separates from its essential kernel, or center; and in thus having been exfoliated, the appearance becomes a shell. Then the appearance—the light by which we who comprehend are penetrated by that which we comprehend—this light of appearance becomes a darkness that separates and isolates not only we who comprehend from that which we comprehend but also the real essence of the comprehended thing from itself: and the word "appearance" thus shifts its meaning from the Platonic-theological meaning of the disclosure or revelation of reality to the Kantian-positivistic meaning of illusory, deceptive. It would be, then, a grave mistake to deny the Kantian meaning of the word "appearance"; it would be an even graver mistake to deny the Platonic significance. But the two meanings point to two *distinct* phases of spiritual existence: where the Platonic meaning points (especially in the ecclesiastical *Weltanschauung*) to goodness and sanctity, the Kantian significance indicates the sinful and the evil—and both therefore, as directions of thought, possess their own subject of investigation.

By exfoliating essence into appearance, sin brings into a *countenance* (*lik*)—i.e., into the purest revelation of God's image—that which is alien to the countenance and, in so doing, it overshadows the light of God: and the face becomes a light mixed with darkness, flesh which becomes here and there corroded, through the twisting of its beauty, into sores. As sin possesses a personality, and as the face ceases to be a window through which God's radiance shines, becoming streaked with the always more visible darknesses, the face separates from the personality—from,

that is, its creative origin—and loses its vitality in becoming a chilling mask of possession by the passions. Dostoevsky well understood this process in his character Stavrogin, whose face had become a stony mask and no longer a real face: such is one of the steps in the disintegration of personality. Further, when a face has become a mask, we can know nothing whatever about what Kant would call its *noumenon;* neither can we (with the positivists) find any reason at all to affirm the real existence of that face. For (using the Apostle's phrase) "having their conscience seared," these mask-faces are dark: not one single ray from God's image within them reaches the surface of their personality: and so we cannot know whether or not God's judgment has been wholly accomplished in them and that they have had taken away from them the token, or covenant, in them which is God's image. It may not yet be accomplished, and so the bright gold talent may still be buried beneath the mountain of dark ash. But it also may be accomplished: if so, then the personality long ago became like those wraiths in the fairy tales who have no backbone. Conversely, high spiritual attainment transforms the face into a lightbearing countenance by driving away all darkness, revealing everything that was under-revealed, 'chasing' everything that was under-chased; and the countenance then becomes an artistic self-portrait whose living material details arise from the art of arts. This art is the practice of selfless asceticism, wherein the devoted practitioner, the ascetic, comes —not merely by his words but by his entire self together with his words; i.e., not abstractly, not by abstract argumentation—the ascetic comes to *bear witness* and prove the truth of authentic reality. Such a circumstance is plainly written on the ascetic's face: as Jesus says, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." (Mt. 5:16) "Your good works": this is not "good works" in the Russian understanding of the words—i.e., not philanthropy and moralism—but rather it is ὑμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα, literally, "the works of your beauty", i.e., the lightbearing

and harmonious manifestations of spiritual personality and, above all, the illumined face whose beauty arises from the dispersal of inward light into the outward appearance; and the light of this face so overwhelms those who behold it that they glorify the heavenly Father whose image corresponds to this brightness before them. And this correspondence is what the onlookers of the first Christian witness to Christ's work saw in his face: "And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15); and it is what is seen in all the holy witnesses of Christ, the last of whom is St. Seraphim of Sarov, and shall always be seen; for all testify to the sacred lightbearing faces of the ascetics, to the radiance surrounding them like discs of sunlight; all who beheld these bearers of blessed life saw with their own eyes at least the rudiments of this transfiguration into light of a face (*litzo*) into a countenance (*lik*).

Nevertheless, it need hardly be insisted upon that the Church, in thus bearing witness to the *bodily* transfiguration of persons, does *not* say that a person's essence—i.e., the inward image of God—also must be transfigured. No; this essence is already pure light; and thus it is itself the creative form by which is transfigured the whole empirical personality, the whole content of a person, including the physical body. For here, in the essential light, dwells the word of God, and by this word is established the direction of ascetic and spiritual practice—as the Apostle writes

> I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. (Rom 12:1-3)

Thus, the Apostle instructs the Romans to "present" (or make) their bodies into "a living sacrifice...unto God"; for the making of one's body into a sacrifice is a *service of the word,* i.e., it is a service that bears witness to the truth because the body bears within it the word of God. Christians speak by their bodies. Further, the Apostle tells what, properly speaking, it means to make the body a sacrifice. It does not, of course, mean the torture and death of martyrdom—for in that kind of sacrifice, those who condemn the martyrs to death are the ones who are presenting the Christians' bodies as sacrifice and not the Christians themselves. What the injunction does entail is explained by the Apostle: "be not conformed to this world." That is, do not share the world's common scheme of things, its common law of life, its common way of being in the world's present circumstances: such is the negative meaning of presenting one's body as sacrifice. The positive meaning is: "be ye transformed," that is, be transfigured, change the scheme of things, the law of life, the way of being. What does it mean to change the spiritual constitution of one's body from something conformed to the world into something transfigured; how does one accomplish this? The Apostle goes on: "be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind"—i.e., the body's transformation, or transfiguration, is accomplished in the renewing of the mind, the renewing of the whole essential center. The sign of such renewing is the doing of God's will. In other words, to present one's body as sacrifice means to attain the spiritual sensitivity of knowing God's will as "good, and acceptable, and perfect." But such sanctity is, as it were, the thesis to which is opposed the antithesis wherein our yearning to so know God's will initiates in us a desire to philosophize about it, thereby replacing a true contact with heaven with our own abstract reasonings. God gave everyone their measure of faith, that is, "a revelation of invisible things." And true thought can occur only within the boundaries of faith; for exceeding the boundaries results only in distorting the thought. The Apostle expresses this in Romans

12:3 with an almost untranslatable aphorism: μὴ ὑπερφονεῖν παρ' ὃ δεῖ φρονεῖν ἀλλὰ φρονεῖν εἰς τὸ σωφρονεῖν, turning upon the wholly opposite meanings of two verbs that nevertheless share the same root: *hyper-phronein* and *so-phronein.* These verbs are thus two poles that correspond: the first (*hyper-phronein*) is the total conforming of the body to this world (whence splits off the mask, *lichina*), while the second is the transfiguration of the body "according to the time to come"—whence shines forth one's true countenance, one's holy face (*lik*).

Orthodox Services and the Icon

The services of the Orthodox temple are the way of ascent. Seen in the aspect of time, a temple service is an interior movement creating in us an inward separation at the fourth coordinate of depth and leading us into the highest realm. But a temple service is also an organized action in space, an action whose surface "membranes" continually direct us to the central kernel; and so temple space and temple time have, in the service, one and the same meaning. (More precisely, they have the same meaning along verbal and numerical coordinates, although they differ along other coordinates.) The temple's spatial center, or kernel, is defined by "membranes": narthex, vestibule, the temple itself, sanctuary, altar-table, antemension, chalice, the Holy Mysteries, Christ, the Father. As has been said before, the temple is Jacob's ladder, leading from the visible into the invisible. But the whole altar is (in its wholeness) already the place of the invisible, the area set apart from this world, separate, withdrawn, dedicated. The altar in its wholeness is heaven as sensible, as mind-apprehendable, as τόπος νοερός and even as τόπος νοητός, as one with (in the phrase from the Divine Liturgy) "the most heavenly and spiritual altar." The symbolic meaning of the altar differs according to the different symbolic meanings of the temple: but the various meanings converge in aligning the incomprehensible with

the actualities of the temple itself. For example, when (following Simeon of Salonica) we see the entire temple in christological terms as Christ God-Man, then the altar signifies the invisible God while the temple means the visible Man. If we use a purely anthropological approach, then the altar represents man's psyche or soul while the temple is his body. Theologically considered, the altar reveals to us the mystery of the Trinity in its incomprehensible essence, while the temple signifies the Trinity as comprehensible in the world's province and power. Finally, in a cosmological interpretation, the same Simeon recognizes in the altar the symbol of heaven while, in the temple, he sees the symbol of earth. Thus, the very diversity of these interpretations strengthens the ontological center of the altar's meaning as the invisible realm.

But this realm, by its very invisibility, is impossible to look at; and the altar, as *noumenon,* would for the spiritually blind be as impossible to see as would the flowing clouds of incense be for the physically blind—for the incense is a landmark which, because it is sensorily comprehensible, reveals the invisible world. Thus, the altar is necessarily limited in order to be something for us; but this limitation arises only through the realities of our dualistic power of perception. If these realities were wholly spiritual, they would be incomprehensible to our weak nature—and what exists in our consciousness would therefore not be made better. But if these realities were only in the visible realm, then they would be unable to indicate where lies the boundary between the visible and invisible: nor would they themselves know where that boundary existed. Heaven and earth, altar and temple: this separation can only occur through the visible witnesses of the invisible world, those living symbols of the co-inherence of this world and the other—i.e., through the holy people. These holy persons, visible in the visible, are nevertheless not conformed to this world, for they have transformed their bodies and resurrected their minds, thereby attaining existence beyond this world in the invisible. Thus, they bear witness to the invisible as they bear witness to

themselves by their holy countenances. They live with us, and they are more easily accessible to us than we are to ourselves. They are not earthly ghosts but persons standing firmly on our earth, not abstract, not bloodless. But neither are they held in bondage to earth; rather, they are the living ideas of the invisible world. Thus, they are (we may say) the witnesses on the boundary between the visible and the invisible, the symbolic images of those visions that arise when passing from one state of consciousness into another. In this sense, they are the living soul of humanity by and through which mankind enters into the highest realm; for they, having left behind all the delusions and fantasies of the ascending passage, and having received the other world—they on their return to earth have transfigured themselves into angelic images of the angelic world. And it is no accident that these witnesses who, by their angelic countenances, have made the invisible close and accessible to us have, since ancient times, been popularly termed angels in the flesh.

When air currents of differing heights and speeds make contact, wavy clouds are formed at the point of contact. At the surface of such contact, the currents continue to flow contrariwise in layers one above another, and the winds that formed the clouds therefore cannot move them away—nor are the layers of air currents moved by their own swiftly moving flows. And so fogs are created that fall to cover the mountain summits; and though mountain windstorms may rage, the foggy cover does not move. Such a fog-cloud is a boundary between the visible and the invisible. It renders inaccessible to our weak sight that which nevertheless it reveals the real presence of; and once we open our spiritual eyes and raise them to the Throne of God, we contemplate heavenly visions: the cloud that covers the top of Mt. Sinai, the cloud wherein the mystery of God's presence is revealed by that which clouds it. This cloud is (in the Apostle's phrase) "a cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1), it is the saints. They surround the altar, and they are the "living stones" that make up the living

wall of the iconostasis, for they dwell simultaneously in two worlds, combining within themselves the life here and the life there. And their upraised gaze bears witness to the operation of God's mystery, for their holy countenances in themselves bear witness to the symbolic reality of their spiritual sight—and, in them, the empirical crust is completely pierced by light from above.

The wall that separates two worlds is an iconostasis. One might mean by the iconostasis the boards or the bricks or the stones. In actuality, the iconostasis is a boundary between the visible and invisible worlds, and it functions as a boundary by being an obstacle to our seeing the altar, thereby making it accessible to our consciousness by means of its unified row of saints (i.e., by its cloud of witnesses) that surround the altar where God is, the sphere where heavenly glory dwells, thus proclaiming the Mystery. Iconostasis is vision. Iconostasis is a manifestation of saints and angels—*angelophania*—a manifest appearance of heavenly witnesses that includes, first of all, the Mother of God and Christ Himself in the flesh, witnesses who proclaim that which is from the other side of mortal flesh. *Iconostasis is the saints themselves.* If everyone praying in a temple were wholly spiritualized, if everyone praying were truly to see, then there would be no iconostasis other than standing before God Himself, witnessing to Him by their holy countenances and proclaiming His terrifying glory by their sacred words.

But because our sight is weak and our prayers are feeble, the Church, in Her care for us, gave us visual strength for our spiritual brokenness: the heavenly visions on the iconostasis, vivid, precise, and illumined, that *articulate,* materially cohere, an image into fixed colors. But this spiritual prop, this material iconostasis, does not conceal from the believer (as someone in ignorant self-absorption might imagine) some sharp mystery; on the contrary, the iconostasis points out to the half-blind the Mysteries of the altar, opens for them an entrance into a world closed to them by their

own stuckness, cries into their deaf ears the voice of the Heavenly Kingdom, a voice made deafening to them by their having failed to take in the speech of ordinary voices. This heavenly cry is therefore stripped, of course, of all the subtly rich expressiveness of ordinary speech: but who commits the act of such stripping when it is we who fail to appreciate the heavenly cry because we failed first to recognize it in ordinary speech: what can be left except a deafening cry? Destroy the material iconostasis and the altar itself will, as such, wholly vanish from our consciousness as if covered over by an essentially impenetrable wall. But the material iconostasis does not, in itself, take the place of the living witnesses, existing *instead of* them; rather, it *points toward* them, concentrating the attention of those who pray upon them—a concentration of attention that is essential to the developing of spiritual sight. To speak figuratively, then, a temple without a material iconostasis erects a solid wall between altar and temple; the iconostasis opens windows in this wall, through whose glass we see (those of us who can see) what is permanently occurring beyond: the living witnesses to God. To destroy icons thus means to block up the windows; it means smearing the glass and weakening the spiritual light for those of us who otherwise could see it directly, who could (we could figuratively say) behold it in a transparent space free of earthly air, a space where we could learn to breathe the pure ethereal air and to live in the light of God's glory: and when this happens, the material iconostasis will self-destruct in that vast obliteration which will destroy the whole image of this world—and which will even destroy faith and hope—and then we will contemplate, in pure love, the immortal glory of God.

Thus, as beginning medical students, we first need to inject into the veins of the body the colors that will focus our attention on the body's paths and tendencies—in the same way that when we first study geometric figures, we carefully and exactly trace out in different colors, in different thicknesses of line and shadings, the various surfaces and lines upon which we are seeking to erect

geometric proofs; or in the same way that when our moral education is begun, our teachers first give us the plainest, most vivid cases of illness, disaster, and suffering that attend the consequences of sin. But when our attentiveness grows more resilient, and we are led past surfaces into a concentration upon an object of knowledge, and we ourselves, from and in ourselves, are able to separate out from the surrounding noise of empirical expressiveness the single note that is the real object—and to do so even when it is lost amidst the other noise that assails us but that is useless for our understanding: when this happens, then the sensuous prop is no longer needed to focus our attentiveness, and it falls away. And the same is true in the realm of metaphysical sight: the spiritual world of the invisible is not some infinitely far off kingdom; instead, it everywhere surrounds us as an ocean; and we are like creatures lost on the bottom of the ocean floor while everywhere is streaming upward the fullness of a grace steadily growing brighter. But we, from the habit of immature spiritual sight, fail to see this lightbearing kingdom; most often, we fail even to assume that it exists, and therefore we only sense unclearly in our hearts the spiritual currents of what is really happening around us. When Christ was healing the blind man in Bethsaida (Mk 8:22), He asked him what he saw, and at first he said, "I see men as trees, walking"—such is the way we first see the images of our spiritual visions. We never see, however, the flights of angels—not "as trees, walking," not even as the quick shadow of a distant bird flying between us and the sun; for, although the most sensitive of us can sometimes sense the powerful motions of the angelic wings, we can experience these great motions only as the very faintest breathing. An icon is the same as this kind of heavenly vision; yet it is not the same, for the icon is the outline of a vision. A spiritual vision is not in itself an icon, for it possesses by itself full reality; an icon, however, because its outline coincides with a spiritual vision, is that vision within our consciousness; finally, therefore, the icon—apart from its spiritual vision—is not

an icon at all but a board. Thus a window is a window because a region of light opens out beyond it; hence, the window giving us this light is not itself "like" the light, nor is it subjectively linked in our imagination with our ideas of light—but the window is that very light itself, in its ontological self-identity, that very light which, undivided-in-itself and thus inseparable from the sun, is streaming down from the heavens. But the window all by itself—i.e., apart from its relationship to the light, beyond its function as carrier of light—is no longer a window but dead wood and mere glass. The thought is simple enough. But almost always we stop in the middle of it, whereas it would be far righter either to stop long before or to go way beyond it; hence, our usual understanding of a symbol as something self-referentially (if conditionally) true is, at bottom, false: a symbol is either more or less than that. If a symbol *as carrier* attains its end, then it is inseparable from the superreality it reveals: hence, it is more than self-referential. If a symbol does not manifest a reality, then it attains no end; thus, we should not see in it any pattern or organization of 'carrying over' or transference; and, in the absence of such, the thing is not a symbol—i.e., it is not a spiritual instrument—but it is merely empirical matter. Let us repeat: the window in itself is not a window—because the very idea of window (like any culturally constructed thing) possesses 'carrying over' or transference, for if it did not, it would not be a thing fashioned within a culture. Thus, a window is either light or else mere wood and glass, but it is never simply a window.

Icons, too, as St. Dionysus Aeropagite says, are "visible images of mysterious and supernatural visions." An icon is therefore always either more than itself in becoming for us an image of a heavenly vision or less than itself in failing to open our consciousness to the world beyond our senses—then it is merely a board with some paint on it. Thus, the contemporary view that sees iconpainting as an ancient fine art is profoundly false. It is false, first of all, because the very assumption that a fine art possesses its

own intrinsic power is, in itself, false: a fine art is either greater or less than itself. Any instance of fine art (such as a painting) reaches its goal when it carries the viewer beyond the limitations of empirically seen colors on canvas and into a specific reality, for a painting shares with all symbolic work the basic ontological characteristic of seeking to be that which it symbolizes. But if a painter fails to attain this end, either for a specific group of viewers or for the world in general, so that his painting leads no one beyond itself, then his work unquestionably fails to be art; we then call it mere daubs of paint, and so on. Now, an icon reaches its goal when it leads our consciousness out into the spiritual realm where we behold "mysterious and supernatural visions." If this goal is not reached—if neither the steadily empathetic gaze nor the swiftly intuitive glance evokes in the viewer the reality of the other world (as the pungent scent of seaweed in the air evokes in us the still faraway ocean), then nothing can be said of that icon except that it has failed to enter into the works of spiritual culture and that its value is therefore either merely material or (at best) archaeological.

St. Joseph of Volotsk writes about the great icon by St. Andrei Rublev called the Holy Trinity:

> How the icon came into life, and how it does so for us now, are things we must imagine and describe. And it is precisely for such a description that we on earth are given the Thrice-Holy Hymn to the One-in-Essence and Life-Giving Trinity whereby our immeasurable desiring and loving ascend in spirit to the icon's incomprehensible prototype so that, by means of its material appearance, our mind's thoughts fly to the heavenly Desiring and Loving where we venerate—not the material thing—but the manifestation of that which makes the material thing beautiful; hence, in a transference, we come to venerate not the icon but the prototype; and in so doing, the Holy Spirit illumines and enlightens us not only now but in the age that is coming when we shall receive the great, incomprehensible gift, the age when all the saints in their physical bodies shall shine with a light brighter than the very sun itself: and it shall happen so because, in kissing this icon with love, they venerate the One Essence of God in the three angelic persons of the icon as they pray to the Holy and Life-Giving Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and give thanks to our God.

This understanding of iconpainting as a way of attaining supersensible perception, a way followed by both the great iconpainters and those who supervised the iconpainting process: such understanding is our goal. Among the iconographic decisions made by the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 is this: "only the technical part of iconpainting belongs to the artist; the determination of the icon itself [διάταξις, i.e., its structure, arrangement and whole formal pattern] plainly belongs to the Holy Fathers." This direct proclamation is not setting forth some supposedly anti-artistic dogma against—or any doctrinal censorship of—iconpainting creativity; rather, it reveals precisely the ones whom the Church has always known to be the true iconpainters: the Holy Fathers. They create the art because they are the ones who contemplate the persons and events that the icon must depict. How could someone create an icon who does not have continuously before him—who has never even glimpsed—the icon's prototype? Even in the everyday world of ordinary experience, an artist must, from his earliest childhood, ceaselessly search the intricate multiplicity of analogous things to find the exactly right models for his art. All the more so, then, would it not be the height of arrogance for people to claim that they have depicted the spiritual realm (that realm which even the saints behold only fragmentarily and fleetingly) when they themselves have never seen it at all?

From the Renaissance on, the religious art of the West has been based upon esthetic delusion. The Western religious artists have loudly proclaimed the nearness and truth of the spiritual reality they claim to represent in their art; but, lacking any genuine relation to that spiritual reality, they think it completely unnecessary to heed even those few scanty instructions about iconpainting (hence, about spiritual reality) that the Roman Church gives them. For the fact is: iconpainting is the transfixing

of heavenly images, the materialization on a board of that living cloud of witnesses streaming about the throne. Icons empirically define those holy countenances that sacred significance has permeated, those hyper-empirical 'ideas' that make heavenly vision accessible to almost everyone; and the iconpainter becomes the witness to these Witnesses, giving us the images (εἶδη, εἰχόνες) of his vision. By virtue of its formal patterns, an icon bears direct visual witness to the reality of this pattern; an icon *speaks*—in color and line. And what it says—written in color—is the Name of God; for what else would God's image be—what else that spiritual light streaming from the saint's holy countenance—except the Name of God written in that countenance? In something like the way that a martyr's speech bears witness not to himself (even though he is the one speaking) but to the Lord, just so do the iconpainters—these witnesses of the Witnesses—bear witness not to their iconpainting, i.e., not to themselves, but to the saints who, in themselves, are bearing witness to the Lord Himself.

Thus, the most persuasive philosophic proof of God's existence is the one the textbooks never mention, the conclusion to which can perhaps best express the whole meaning: There exists the icon of the Holy Trinity by St. Andrei Rublev; therefore, God exists.

In the iconpainting images we ourselves—wholly selves—see the illumined countenances of the saints and, in them, behold both the revealed image of God and God Himself. And like the Samaritan woman to Christ, we say to the iconpainter:

> Now we believe—not because you bear witness to the sanctity of saints by your icons but because we ourselves can hear coming out from them, through your brush-work, the self-revelation of the saints, and not in words but in their holy countenances. We ourselves can hear how the supremely sweet voice of God's word, the True Witness, penetrates into the essence of the saints by its supersensible sound and brings their entire being into perfect harmony. For it is not you, O iconpainter, who has created these images; it is not you who has shown to our joyous eyes these vividly alive ideas; no, they themselves have appeared within our contemplation, and you have simply taken away the obstacle that hid their light from us, for you have helped strip away the scales that covered our spiritual sight. And because you have helped us, we now see—no longer your masterpiece—but the wholly real images themselves. I gaze into this icon and I say in myself: this is She Herself, not Her image, but She Herself who, with your help, iconpainter, I am contemplating. As through a window, I see the Mother of God, the Mother of God Herself! and it is She Herself that I am now praying to face to face and not to an image. A window is only a window, and the board of an icon is merely wood, paint, and finish. But through the window I behold the Mother of God, a vision of the Most Pure. Yes, iconpainter, you have shown Her to me, but you did not create Her; rather, you have parted the veil so that She, who was behind it, now stands as a real experience not only for me but also for you; and She appears to you and is found by you, but she is never invented by you even in the strongest currents of your highest inspiration.

Contemporary empirical positivism underestimates the icon; one can also overestimate it; but it is essential never to become fixated upon its psycho-associative power, i.e., upon the icon as pure art. Iconic art accords to its essential symbolism and thereby reveals its spiritual essence in nothing other than our (the viewers') spiritual ascent "from image to prototype," i.e., in our attaining ontological contiguity with the prototype itself. For then, and only then, does the empirical sign become so filled with the living waters that the sign (always inseparable from its prototype) is no longer merely "art" but is rather the first wave called forth—*evoked*—by essential reality; and all the other ways wherein reality becomes spiritually present to us are also the waves that reality evokes—just as our whole life communicates with the essence of reality in a series of continuous waves: because we can communicate with an essence only through its energies and never directly with the essence itself. And because an icon makes the light of an illumined person *appear* to us, it is an energy; more precisely, the grace of God exceeds our capacity to think it, even if our thought is self-certifiably "sober"; for since ontology and the icon are fully contiguous, the icon possesses cognitive meaning.

The Councils on the Icon and the Iconpainter's Canonic Life

In this understanding we approach the conceptual term continuously used in the eighth-century iconoclastic struggle: *remembering*.

Over and over, the proponents of icons refer to the icon's power to *remind:* the Holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council say, "the icons remind those who pray of the icons' prototypes and, through gazing upon the icons, the believers 'lift up their minds from the images to the prototypes'." These are terms well established in theology. But many nowadays wrongly interpret these terms to mean something subjective and 'psychological,' thereby radically twisting and falsifying the thought of the Holy Fathers; moreover, under the guise of defending the icons, they recreate an iconoclasm more thoroughly violent than that eighth-century form the Church long ago defeated: for the ancient iconoclasts were more thoughtful, intricate, and courteous than our contemporary "defenders of icons" who parrot and thereby reduce ancient truth when they argue against Protestant rationalists. The older iconoclasts never in the slightest denied the genuine spiritual usefulness of religious art, that art to which we now assign the icon; contemporary iconoclasts, however, in their insistence upon the merely subjective psychological value of icons as their sole value, thereby completely deny the ontological connection between icon and prototype. And in this denial all the veneration of icons—praying to them, kissing them, lighting candles to them, setting lamps before them, the priest censing them—all the centuries-old practices of Christianity become, in this denial which sees in the icon only an 'artistic depiction' that refers to itself and the viewer but never to its prototype—all these practices become criminal idolatry. For if icons are 'artistic depictions,' then it is sinfully absurd to honor what is merely educational supplies, for only God Himself deserves such honor; thus the honor given to icons—given because of the ancient teaching

that, in doing such honor, the believer ascends from image to proto-image—this ascending, this ancient Church belief, becomes something absolutely incomprehensible. In the century of the iconoclastic controversy, people knew precisely what they were struggling for, and they knew clearly who was friend and who was enemy; plainly, there were icon-smashers and icon-worshippers. The entire matter has fallen into oblivion; today, it is not clear whether the iconoclastic controversy took place in the ninth century—and not in the twentieth; in Byzantium—and not in England; whether it was founded on the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle—and not on the views of Bacon, Hume, and Mill. For into the patristic terminology of the Holy Fathers there has slipped the whole content of English sensationalistic-empirical psychology, thereby entirely ousting the ontological meaning of Being as found in ancient idealist philosophy, with the result that the contemporary defenders of the icon have won a victory long ago lost by the eighth-century iconoclasts.

Thus, let us ask what the Seventh Ecumenical Council means in its decisions by the terms *prototype, image, consciousness, remembering,* and so on.

An icon remembers its prototype. Thus, in one beholder, it will awaken in the bright clarities of his conscious mind a spiritual vision that matches directly the bright clarities of the icon; and the beholder's vision will be comparably clear and conscious. But in another person, the icon will stir the dreams that lie deeper in the subconscious, awakening a perception of the spiritual that not only affirms that such seeing is possible but also brings the thing seen into immediately felt experience. Thus, at the highest flourishing of their prayer, the ancient ascetics found that their icons were not simply windows through which they could behold the holy countenances depicted on them but were also doorways through which these countenances actually entered the empirical

world. The saints came down from the icons to appear before those praying to them.

Similar experiences have occurred less frequently (but still connectedly) to persons who were not following any ascetic practice of prayer at all: that is, a sharp penetration of a spiritual reality into the soul, a penetration almost like a physical blow or sudden burn that instantly shocks the viewer who is seeing, for the first time, one of the great works of sacred iconpainting. There is not the slightest question in such experiences that what is coming through the icon is merely the viewer's subjective invention, so indisputably objective is its impact upon the viewer, an impact *equally* physical and spiritual. Like light pouring forth light, the icon stands revealed. And no matter where the icon is physically located in the space we encounter it, we can only describe our experience of seeing it as *a beholding that ascends.* Our seeing rises above everything around us, for we recognize that we are, in this act of seeing, existing in the icon's space in eternity. In such acts of seeing, the fires of our lusts and the emptiness of our earthly hungers simply and wholly cease; and we recognize the vision as something that, in essence, exceeds the empirical world, as something acting upon us *from its own dominion.* "Yes," we say, "this icon plainly exists—here are the brush strokes right before me—but it's inconceivable it exists, my eyes cannot believe what they're seeing": such we testify to the icon's triumphant beauty overwhelming everything.

Such is the effect, then, of St. Andrei Rublev's great icon of the Holy Trinity; such, too, is the incomparable expression of the icon known as the Holy Mother of Vladimir. But these great icons—that in a single stroke overwhelm even the crudest, least sensitive eyes—even these icons do not stand apart from all other icons. Using such icons as the measure of the highest in iconpainting, let us now say preliminarily: all icons possess in themselves the power of spiritual revelation, though some veil it almost

impenetrably. But the hour is coming when the spiritual state of every icon's beholder will bestow upon him the power to experience every icon's spiritual essence even through the most impenetrable of form-distorting veils, and then every icon on earth will live and effect its operation as witness of the supreme world. As Lermontov says in his poem:

Mother of God, I stand now praying
Before this icon of your radiant brightness—
Not praying to be saved from some battlefield,
Not giving thanks, not seeking forgiveness
For my soul's sins, not for all the souls,
Numb, joyless, and desolate in earth
But I pray for her whom wholly I give you now:
Shield her from this vast world of violence....

So Lermontov—in restlessness and anxiety—saw revealed in the icon the Mother of God. And it is not merely a poet's one stanza that testifies to this most essential teaching of the Church: all icons are miracle-working, i.e., all can be windows into eternity, though not every icon is apriori so—the very happening of an icon so testifies. That is, when an icon happens, its happening (as the very word indicates) means that something has already happened, something has already *entered into appearance,* so that we may say that the icon happens and appears in making happen and appear in us those very appearings of hap-pened hap-iness (i.e., those blessed visions) through which the icon itself happened and appeared. The beholder's soul is necessarily healed in touching, through the icon, the spiritual realm: but that such healing happens means, first of all, that the icon's happening is the having happened of miracle-working help.

Thus, every icon can be seen as the factual certainty of divine reality. An icon may be skillfully or poorly executed, but, at root, it *necessarily authenticates* perception of the world beyond the senses through an always *authentic* spiritual experience. Such an icon could be the first transfixing of authentic experience in such

a way that it becomes the manifest revelation of that experience. Such an icon then becomes (as is said) a prototypical or 'first-appeared' icon and is thus considered a source; it thereby corresponds to the original manuscript written by the one who experienced a revelation.

Subsequently, there are copies made of this prototypical icon, ones more or less exactly reproducing its shapes. But the spiritual content of these copies is not something new (when compared to the prototype) nor is it even something similar; rather, the spiritual content is *exactly the same* (though it may be in a veiled, dimmed, or dulled medium). Moreover, exactly because their spiritual content is not merely similar to but actually identical with the prototype, the copies can modify and vary the basic interpretation.

If someone copying a prototypical icon is unable to experience in himself that which he depicts, if while following the original he fails to make contact with the reality of it, then (being honest) he will try as precisely as possible to reproduce in his copy the prototype's outward features; but it almost always happens that, in such a case, he will not comprehend the icon as an opening and so, lost in copying the fine lines and brush strokes, he will interpret unclearly the icon's essence. But if, on the other hand, through the prototype he is opened up into the spiritual reality depicted on it and thereby comes to see it clearly (if secondarily), he will—because he possesses the living reality of his own aliveness—manifest his own viewpoint and thus swerve from a strict calligraphic adherence to the original. In a manuscript you write describing a country someone else has previously described in an earlier manuscript, you will see your own words and phrases in your very own handwriting; but the living basis of your manuscript is assurdedly identical with that of the earlier one: the description of the country. Thus, the variations arising between successive copies of a prototypical icon indicate neither the illu-

sory subjectivity of what is being depicted nor the arbitrariness of the iconpainting process but exactly the opposite: the living reality which, remaining itself, nevertheless will appear with those variations that correspond to the spiritual life of the iconpainter who seeks to comprehend that living reality. Thus (ignoring mere servile mechanical reproduction), the difference between a protoptypical icon and its iconic copy can approximate quite precisely that between an explorer's account of a newly discovered country and a later journeyer's narrative who visits that country because of the first explorer's account; no matter the historical importance of the first account, the later narrative may well be more exact and complete. Just so in iconopainting: sometimes an iconic copy can become particularly precious, one whose extraordinary indications confirm both its own spiritual truth and its supreme correspondence to the spiritual reality it depicts.

But, in any case, the basis of every icon is spiritual experience. As a result, we could organize icons into four categories, depending upon their point of origin:

1. Biblical icons, those whose reality is grounded in the revealed Word of God;

2. Portrait icons, those arising from the iconpainter's direct experience and memory of persons and events he not only outwardly saw as empirical reality but inwardly comprehended as spiritual fact;

3. Icons from the Holy Tradition, i.e., ones created from the oral or written record of other persons' spiritual experience in the past; and

4. Revealed icons, ones wherein the iconpainter records his own spiritual experience arising from either direct vision or from mystical dream.

These four categories, however, by their abstract clarity also show us that—practically speaking—only the fourth category really applies. For if certain icons are unquestionably revealed, then all

the icons in the other three categories (even the Biblical ones) compel the same conclusion: the historical authenticity of certain events and persons does not exclude their existence in eternity; thus, the possibility emerges that we may contemplate such events and persons by raising our consciousness *above time*. All icons are therefore revealed icons. And even when the icon is a portrait icon, it is clear that in order for it to be an icon, it must in the iconpainter be based in a vision (for example, a vision of spiritual light in the person—even though that person is still living on earth): thus, the portrait icon cannot be directly opposite to a revealed icon. Equally, the icons of the Holy Tradition demand that the iconpainter go beyond the merely abstract accounts of past experience and see something with his own spiritual eyes.

Not only in the Eastern church was this understanding of the visionary basis of iconpainting essential but also in the West, in times and places far from mystical contemplation, there were those secretly living the belief that spiritual revelation was the only true ground of iconpainting and therefore that the only truly reverential things were those created not from earthly but from heavenly sources. A striking example is that of the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael. In a letter to his friend Count Baldazar Castalione, Raphael wrote an enigmatic sentence: "In the world there are so few images of feminine grace that I have stuck to the one mysterious image that sometimes visits my soul." What does he mean, "visits my soul"? The unraveling of the enigma can be found in the account by another friend of Raphael's, Donato D'Angelo Bramante:

> I write here for my own delight the miracle entrusted to me by my dear friend Raphael and commanded to conceal under the seal of silence. Once when I had expressed to him with an open and full heart my wonder at the ravishing images in his work of the Madonna and the Holy Family, I besought him to unravel the mystery of where in the world he had seen such beauty, such touching gazes and inimitable expressions as were in his Holy Virgin. With his youthful shyness, his

> unique humility, Raphael fell silent for sometime, and then with a flood of tears he embraced me and told me his secret. He said that from his earliest youth he had had always a burning in his soul, a unique sacred feeling for the Mother of God—and sometimes he would say Her name aloud, feeling a sadness sweep over his soul. From the first stirrings of his desire to paint, he had nourished within an overwhelming hunger to paint vividly a picture of the Virgin in Her heavenly perfection—but he never dared trust his ability. Unceasingly, night and day, his spirit tirelessly attempted to picture in his mind the true image of the Virgin. But he could never satisfy himself, for it always seemed to him that this inward image was somehow dimmed into the gloom of his own mental fantasies. Yet sometimes it seemed that a divine spark of brightness would flame in his soul and then this inward image of the Virgin would be outlined in light exactly as he would want to paint it—but always it was a fleeting instant, and he could not hold this true image in his soul. Anxiety ceaselessly tormented his mind, continually growing, for he could see this true image of Her features only in briefest passing, and in his soul there arose a darkness that did not even desire to transfigure the dim image into the illumined one. At last, he could not stay his hand, and tremblingly he began to paint the Madonna. And as he worked, his spirit grew always more fiery.
>
> Then one night he dreamt he was praying to Her illumined image as he had so often fleetingly beheld: and, all at once, a sudden surge of anxiety awakened him. In the night darkness, he looked at the wall across from his bed and saw that it was bathed in light, and the light was hanging on the wall, and it was the unfinished image of the Virgin shining in soft radiance, perfect, an image and yet living! and divinity was shining everywhere from it! Tears filled his eyes as he looked into Her indescribably tender face, and it was as if every least mistake he had made as an artist was being erased by this living vision of Her face; it even seemed to him that She was quite literally moving. And most wonderful of all, Raphael found in this bright vision precisely that for which he had searched all his life and that which he had for so long experienced only in a dark haziness. He could not now remember how he had fallen back asleep, but upon arising in the morning, he felt as though he had been reborn. This vision was forever etched into his soul, his emotions, and thus carried in his soul, it vividly guided his depictions of the Mother of God, and whenever he looked at any of his paintings that depicted this image of Her, he felt a sacred awe and

> trembling. This is what my friend, my dearest Raphael, told me and I have thought this miracle so important and remarkable, that for my own delight I have written it on this paper.

Thus we understand what Raphael meant in his sentence about the mysterious image that sometimes visited his soul.

An icon is a transfixing, an annunciation that proclaims in color the spiritual world; therefore, iconpainting is the occupation of a person who sees that world as sacred; and so iconpainting "art" (to use the term in the sense it has in the secular world) belongs to no one else but the Holy Fathers. In fact, the consciousness of the Church, especially as expressed in the resolutions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, does not even deem it necessary to distinguish between true iconpainters and the Holy Fathers, instead opposing them both to the lowest form of iconpainter, the hack-copyist, the mere traders in icons, or (as they were known in ancient Russia) the "iconers" who, because of their careless disregard for genuine iconpainting, were also called the "icon-daubers". But such Russian terms, though they illustrate something of the Council's meaning, do not reveal its essence. What the Council plainly said was that icons are created not through the artist's own intention (ἐφεύρεσις) but through the immutable law and Holy Tradition (θεσμοθεσία καὶ παράδοσις) of the Ecumenical Church; that to compose and 'pre-execute' icons is the occupation not of artists but of the Holy Fathers; and that to the Fathers belong the integral right of composition (διάταξις) while to the artist belongs only its fulfillment in the technique (τεχνή).

In the depths of Christian antiquity there is rooted the understanding that the icon is something not subject to arbitrary change; and as this understanding strengthens, deepens, and manifests itself in the succeeding centuries, it becomes more firmly expressed, particularly in the Russian ecclesiastical rulings in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here, the many iconpainting authentifications, both verbal and visual, testify to the stability of the traditional practice; and their essential terms and

concepts flow down into the very depths of Christian antiquity—although some of their elements are rooted in the darkness of pre-Christian history. Thus we can understand the deliberate warning to the iconpainter repeated many times in the authentifications: anyone who ignores the Holy Tradition and begins to fashion icons according to his own thinking will be condemned to eternal torment.

In these norms of Church consciousness, secular historians and positivist theologians see this unique conservatism of the Church as the variety they know: a senile sustaining of habitual forms in the circumstances of Church art having ended, seeing the norms as obstacles that are preventing the emergence of new religious art. This fundamental misunderstanding of the Church's conservatism is, simultaneously, a misunderstanding of artistic creativity itself. To the truly creative, the presence of a canonical tradition is never a hindrance, for in every sphere of art the complexities of canonical forms act as a touchstone that, while it may break lesser talent, will serve to sharpen true creativity. Lifting creativity to the very heights of human achievement, canonical tradition frees the artist's energy for new attainments, releasing it from the necessity of sterile repetition; the demands of canonical tradition—more precisely, the gift from mankind to artist of canonical tradition—is therefore for the artist not an enslavement but a liberation. An artist who in ignorance imagines that, without canonical tradition, he could create a great work is exactly like a person walking on the earth who comes to imagine that the firm ground under his feet is hindering him, and that if he were only suspended in the air, how much farther he could go! In reality, such an artist is throwing away the perfection of forms and is, instead, taking hold subconsciously of the wrecked fragments of forms whose perfection—now accidental and imperfect—can only be wholly subconscious memory; and such work is called "creative". The true artist, on the other hand, wants not his *own* (at any cost) truth but rather the objectively beautiful and artisti-

cally incarnate *truth of things*—and he cares nothing at all about pride's mean-spirited question whether he is the first or the hundredth to speak this truth. If the work is true, then it establishes its own value. In the same way wherein every person alive busies himself with the living realities of his own life rather than with the question whether his life resembles his neighbor's—that is, he lives by and in himself for the truth, in the absolute certainty, first that the truth of his life is necessarily and essentially unique and individual and, second, that his life can be truthful only within the universal currents of human history and thus cannot be self-willfully invented:—just so, the work of art lives, and the artist who bases his work on the canonical tradition (if it can be found where he is) discovers in and through the canons the energy to create works wherein reality is the true object of their meditation, wholly certain in the knowledge that his work (if free) will never duplicate another's—though his actual concern is not with that issue but with the truthfulness shown in the work. Thus, to accept the traditional canon is to enter into a relationship with all humanity and to realize that humanity has not lived in vain, that it has not been without truth, and that, instead, it has comprehended truths that have been tested and purified by the councils and the generations; thus, humanity is confirmed in the canon.

The immediate task, then, is to understand the canon, to enter into it as into the essential rationality of humankind, spiritually straining so as to attain the highest level whereupon we may determine ourselves; and to see, too, how from this level the truth of things then reveals itself to me, the individual artist; for it is universally acknowledged that such spiritual straining, wherein our individual reason enters into the universal forms, opens the source of all creation. Contrarily, when an artist in the weakness of proud self-will abandons the universal forms, he finds himself on a level far beneath the spiritually attained one, a level beneath even the personal, one that is instead merely random and unconscious. To use a figure: were I to dip my finger and not my pen in

this inkwell, I would not in this way be exhibiting originality and inspiration even if I managed to compose some lines of poetry. The more complex and remote from ordinary life the subject in hand is, the more the artist must concentrate on the related or corresponding canonic forms, both because only so can he be responsible to the art itself and because only so can he make accessible that which is remote.

In relation to the spiritual world, the Church—always living, always creative—seeks neither to defend the old forms as such nor to oppose them to new ones as such. The Church's understanding of art was, is, and will be realism. This means that the Church, "the pillar and foundation of truth," requires only one thing: the truth. Thus, the Church will never ask whether the form is old or new; rather, She will demand that the thing in question be authentic truth, and if She is satisfied it is so, then She will bless it and take it into Her treasury of Truth, while if not so satisfied, She will reject it.

In the case of iconpainting, if assemblies of the devout find in an icon the accomplishment of the universal canons, then there is formal acknowledgement that the icon in question reproduces what is recognizably the truth or opens into something else also truthful; but when no such discovery occurs (i.e., when the canons cannot be perceived in the work), then it is an impermissible work, or else its revelatory truth still has to be demonstrated; and if the latter, then the iconpainter has to comprehend what he has in fact done and be able to show this to others. Thus, the catholicity of the Church cannot refuse to ask Vrubel, Vasnetsov, Nesterov and other recent iconpainters whether they are depicting something they invented in their own imaginations or some truly existing reality—and, furthermore, whether they have *told truth* about this reality and have produced 'first-appeared' icons, or whether they produced yet another of those whose number exceeds in Church history all the holy visions of true iconpaint-

ing—whether, that is, they have *told falsehood.* The question is not whether an image of a woman is "skillfully" or "poorly" executed (such measures lie merely in the artist's intention); the question is, is She in reality the Mother of God? If an artist is inwardly unable to reveal the spiritual self-identity of the person he depicts—if it is, in fact, someone else altogether—then is not what is happening immense spiritual disorder and has not the artist spoken about the Mother of God with a brush filled with falseness? When contemporary artists look about for human models in order to paint sacred images, then they are already proving that they do not clearly see the sacred person their imagery depicts; for if they did, then every alien image from the earthly world would be for them a hindrance and not a help to spiritual contemplation. It seems as though most religious artists see nothing whatever, either clearly or hazily, but, instead, are superficially restating an external image along the lines of half-conscious memories of Theotokos icons, confusing canonic Truth with their own arbitrariness and daring, when they finish it, to entitle their work the "Mother of God." But if they cannot show the Truthfulness of their work—if they themselves remain unsure of it—then are they not testifying to this very doubtfulness? Are they not wrongly taking upon themselves the immense responsibility that belongs solely to the Holy Fathers? Are they not therefore imposters? Are they not liars?

If a theologian were to describe the life of the Virgin Mary in terms outside the Tradition, would not a reader rightly demand to know the theologian's sources? And having gotten an unsatisfactory answer, would not the reader rightly accuse the theologian of writing lies? But a theologian-iconpainter depicting the Holy Mother somehow considers such lying his privilege. Thus, while Renan's *Vie de Jesus* was never meant to be read in liturgical services in place of the Gospels, false icons are not only placed in churches but are made the object of liturgical actions. For icons manifest the Truth to all persons, even the wholly illiterate; theology, however, is accessible only to the highly educated few and

therefore bears less responsibility; nevertheless, some contemporary icons publicly cry out lies in the midst of churches. Even the artists of the Renaissance West, not bound in the slightest by the canon, used a tiny handful of basic iconpainting themes, doing so without any ecclesiastical demand whatever and even, now and again, observing the Church Tradition: so greatly does the artist need the canonic norms. For the Church norms, even when very strictly observed, exercise almost no restraint upon the iconpainter—a fact demonstrated when we compare ancient icons of the same theme, even of the same exact drawing; never are any two of them identical, and even the resemblance we see at first glance only heightens the originality of approach each icon uniquely takes. Further, the way wherein a new iconic creation, arising from a new experience of the heavenly mysteries, *perfectly fits into* the already opened canonical forms, entering into them as into a fully prepared nest: this is what we see in St. Andrei Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity. The iconic subject of three angels seated at a table existed within the canonically determined ecclesiastical art long before St. Andrei. In this sense, he invented nothing new, and (archaeologically speaking) his Trinity icon is one of a long series of depictions of Abraham's hospitality that begins somewhere in the 4th to the 6th centuries. Archaeologically, these depictions were iconic illustrations of a person's life (namely, Abraham's) and, in being so, they also foreshadowed the revelation of the Holy Trinity. But the Trinitarian *meaning* of these early icons is a foreshadowing in the same way that baptismal meaning is a foreshadowing in the passage of the Israelites over the Red sea, or that the Burning Bush is a foreshadowing of the Holy Mother: for when we intently examine even the perfect renderings of the Burning Bush, we can see no hint in them of the Virgin. Just so, the image of the three strangers at Abraham's table at Mamre could, abstractly considered, have produced the dogma of Trinity; but it could not, in itself, paint the icon.

In the fourteenth century, for a variety of reasons, the dogma of the Trinity became the special object of Ecumenical attention, and the Church gave it then a precise verbal formulation. The man who completed this work, crowning the whole of the medieval epoch, was "the worshipper of the most Holy Trinity," St. Sergius of Radonezh. He was the one who understood the heavenly azure—that unassailable, transworldly peace which is ceaselessly flowing into the immortal depths of perfect love—as both the goal our meditation must seek and the commandment our lives must incarnate; as, that is, the basis of both ecclesiastical reality and personal life as well as the ground of all political and social forms. He saw the iconic image of this love in the canonic patterns of Abraham's Epiphany at Mamre. But St. Sergius' experience of this new vision of the spiritual world was seen in the saint by St. Andrei Rublev, who (guided by St. Nikon, the disciple of St. Sergius) made then his great icon of the Holy Trinity "in praise of Father Sergei." At that moment, the Trinity icon-series ceased being illustrations of Abraham's personal life, its relationship to the Mamre experience becoming merely rudimentary. For the Rublev icon shows in the most astonishing way this new vision of the Holy Trinity, a new revelation shining through the veils of what are now the old and clearly less significant forms. But these old forms do not obstruct the new revelation because they themselves were expressions of authentic reality and therefore not mere inventions—and also because the new revelation is comparably an expression of the very same reality and also thus not subjective conjecture. What was strange or unclear in the vision's first outline was filled densely in with historical details, so that when, centuries later, the vision returned, the vision was at last understood, a process taking humankind millenia of spiritual labor to develop the necessary organs of perception within sacred consciousness. And at that moment, the historical details all by themselves fell away from the composition, and St. Andrei's icon (rather, St. Sergius'), both the 'first-appeared' and the repetitions

of it, both old and new, together became a new canon, a new instance or exemplar, one confirmed by Church consciousness and firmly established as a canonic norm by many Russian councils, including the 100-Chapters Council.

The more that spiritual comprehension becomes ontological, the more unshakably it is accepted as something long familiar; and for a long time, human consciousness had awaited that comprehension. Thus, such comprehension truly is a joyous message from the depths of existence, from the almost completely forgotten but always inwardly cherished memory of our spiritual homeland. For we genuinely receive a revelation from that which has entered our homeland, comprehending not outwardly but inwardly in remembering that an icon is a remembering of a high prototype. That is why we ourselves need not penetrate deeply into the spiritual world, for it, by extraordinary means, will always enfold itself into unusual, even mysterious forms that, like so-called rebuses, reinstate, in terms we can see, the spiritual world. At one extreme stands purely figurative art at the very boundary of verbal narration, but without verbal clarity; at the other is that degenerative symbolism called allegory, which possesses nothing but verbal clarity. But this does not mean, however, that an allegorized symbol is necessarily an abstraction in the inventor's mind. But its purely contemplative visuality, along with the difficult indirectness with which one may pass through it to its prototype, makes the allegorized symbol accessible only to a very few. Moreover, in the same way that apostasy is a separation from all humanity, so an allegorized symbol is opposed to all true symbols and, in being exalted above the catholicity of true symbols, the allegory easily becomes the source of heresy, i.e., the source of all isolation or sectarianism.

At the close of the sixteenth century, as ecclesiastical life fell into decadence, the spirit of allegory everywhere took hold as part of an ontological collapse, resulting in a heaviness that made

greatly difficult any rising up out from the merely sensory world. And in his inability any longer to see clearly the supernatural world, the iconpainter attempted to compensate by increasing the complexity of his theological compositions, thereby uniting theological rationalism with purely conventional images drawn from the merely empirical world of the senses. The result was that the theological rationalism degenerated into purely abstract schemata expressed primarily in the terms of the conventionally sensory imagery: a frivolousness both secular and sensual. Such was the sad end of things at the close of the eighteenth century, a conclusion made infinitely more dismal by the fact that, in Russia, the figurative arts had attained heights unequalled anywhere in the world.

Earlier, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Russian iconpainting had reached a height of perfection without parallel in the whole history of world art—a pinnacle shared, perhaps, only by classical Greek sculpture (which also incarnated spiritual vision), and (again like Greek sculpture) whose brilliance was corrupted by rationalism and empiricism.

Thus, at the heights of perfection, iconpainting is wholly alien to even the slightest shadow of allegory, opening the spirit into a bright vision of primordial unity by means of forms so organically created that one can easily see in them the canons common to all humankind; and because they are first of all revelations of the life in Christ, and because they are also manifestations of the purest ecclesiastical creativity, these forms become the most beloved primordial forms in all humankind. For in these iconic forms we can recognize the separate appearances of ancient cultures: e.g., the features of Zeus in the face of Christ Pantocrator or the features of Athena and Isis in the Mother of God. "Wisdom is justified of her children" (Mt.11:19), for in these hints and guesses in the faces of Zeus and Athena, the children of ancient

wisdom, we see how Holy Wisdom was using the whole of world art-history to prepare for the revelation of truth.

Thus we say again, that the more ontological the vision is, the more universal will be the human form this vision expresses—in the same way that the most sacred words of the highest mysteries are always the humanly simplest words: father and son; birth; seed rotting and sprouting; bridegroom and bride; bread and wine; breath of wind; the light of the sun; and so on. A canonical form is a form of supreme essence, a form which is impossible to simplify further; and while deviations from canonic forms limit and artificialize, canonic forms liberate: thus, imagine how an artist who is genuinely free would cry out were deviant forms to be established as the norms of figurative art!

In canonic forms, on the contrary, we can breathe freely, for they wean us from the streams of inessentialities that seem always to disturb the movements of the divine creation. The most developed, the most established, the strictest canons express most deeply and purely the universal spiritual needs of all humanity; for the canons, in becoming the Church's wisdom, become the catholic canons of all humanity. Thus, a soul will purify itself through the canons of ascetic discipline, stripping away everything within itself that is merely subjective and inessential and allowing the spiritual discipline to open the soul to that eternal, primordial truth of human nature created in the image of Christ (i.e., to the absolute foundation of creation)—thereby finding in one's own deepest soul the very thing long ago implied in the canons and which inevitably had to be expressed in the whole course of history. The ascetic will then see—even in the fierce glare of the fallen day's vanities—the beauty of the divine starry sky.

For some reason I remember here the great elder Ambrose of the Optina Hermitage. He had an icon that had been composed with shallowness of feeling by an iconpainter badly infected with the disease of naturalism, an icon portraying the Multiplication of

the Loaves. Nevertheless, from this monk's tiny cell in a very remote monastery in a still more remote province, from an old, poor, and simple man, arose an extraordinarily powerful idea, one contradicting the whole pattern of contemporary ecclesiastical sophistication and refined synodal culture: that this poor icon depicted the Good Goddess; for who else is the Multiplicatrix of Loaves, who else except a vision of the Mother of God in the canonic form of the Mother of Loaves: Demeter. The bad iconpainting of the 1880's disobeyed true spiritual discipline; yet, solely by inner feeling, Ambrose could see (as can we) exactly how the Church affirmed that ancient image of mellow Demeter, that image wherein the ancient Greeks registered their prescient guesses about the Mother of God.

In the most precise sense of the word, only the saints can be iconpainters; and it may well be that the vast majority of the saints have "painted" icons in the sense of directing, through their spiritual experience, the very hands of those iconpainters who possessed both enough technical skill to depict sacred vision and enough spiritual intelligence to respond sensitively to saintly instruction. Such artistic cooperation need not amaze us. In earlier periods, in times of greater cultural cohesion than ours, artistic work was generally done collaboratively—something we can see, for example, in the workshops and studios of the great masters, even in the periods when artistic individuality was sharply emphasized. In the Medieval period, when artistic consciousness was more unified, and when the guidance of a spiritual director was culturally recognized, collaborative iconography perhaps reached special perfection. It may even be that the Gospels and other sacred Christian texts were still earlier so created: the Gospel of Mark, for example, under the guidance of St. Peter, and the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles under the guidance of the Apostle. It is no wonder, then, that certain masters of iconpainting, obedient to the saints who proclaimed visions of

immortal beauty, would depict that beauty under the direct supervision and verification of the very saints themselves.

But the techniques of the brush are not always inherently opposed to the contemplation of spiritual vision; and through the whole history of the Christian Church there runs (like a golden thread) a tradition of *sacred* iconpainting. Beginning with the first witnesses of the incarnate Word and carrying through all the centuries, there march those saints who are themselves iconpainters along with those iconpainters who themselves are saints. We know the names (though we cannot pretend to know all) of these saintly iconpainters, led by the evangelist St. Luke.

To these iconpainters, and to those like them, also belong those who create the new or 'first-appeared' icons. Furthermore, we must also add the names of iconpainters who multiply the 'first-appeared' evidence of the spiritual realm. Just as the spiritual word needs copyist-writers, so the spiritual vision needs copyist-iconpainters. These copyists may not need be the eagles in the heavens, but they cannot be so far removed from spiritual intensity as not to feel the significance and responsibility of what they are doing as witnesses—or, more precisely, as assistants in the witnessing. For they are not iconpainters in the sense that they are craftsmen who happen to be making icons as opposed to another kind of fine art; they are not skilled technicians who may or may not belong to the Church. Rather, they are holders of an unique Church office. For in the consciousness of the Church, they hold this special office in the sacred hierarchy, in the true theocracy, of the Church, and, as members of the Church, they are recognized in their function as iconpainters. They occupy a place midway between those who serve at the altar and the ordinary layperson. They live a prescribed life, almost semi-monastic, under the direct supervision of the Metropolitan, the local bishop, and the specially designated wardens of iconpainters. The Church honors Her iconpainters by giving them this unique status—and, in some

rare instances, She has even granted financial rewards, as in the extraordinary eighteenth-century case of one Simon Ushakov, who was given noble rank. On the other hand, the Church recognizes the necessity to scrutinize attentively not only the work of Her iconpainters but their very lives.

An iconpainter's life is therefore not simple. Because they are raised in the ecclesiastical hierarchy above ordinary laypeople, they must therefore practice a greater humility, purity and piety, a profounder practice of fasting and prayer, and a more constant and deeper contact with their spiritual father. Thus, the bishops consider their iconpainters as people "higher than the ordinary." Conversely, then, were an iconpainter to violate the prescribed Rule of his life, he would be immediately dismissed from the work under a condemnation to suffer in eternal torment—such would be the requirements in that case. But, in actual reality, iconpainters always put themselves under disciplines stricter than any given to them, becoming genuine ascetics in the exact sense of the word.

Thus, it is not for reasons of "law and order" (as the phrase has it) that the Church tells Her iconpainters that they should see their work as acts in a high and sacred service; rather, She is attempting to link them to the very same "golden thread" of logic that runs from the first Witness—i.e., Christ Himself—to the very center of the Incarnation that is the Holy Church Herself. This artery of iconpainting sustains the whole ecclesiastical body and therefore it can nowhere be allowed to run dry, and the ecclesiastical canons of iconpainting intend precisely that: to provide the free flow of grace from the head of the Church (i.e., Christ) to Her very least organ. And, truth to tell, the more intricately ramifying the spread of this arterial system of iconpainting, the less dangerous for the whole ecclesiastical body is the clogging of a single capillary. But nevertheless even the least icon-copy—one of those reproduced by the millions—must bear

witness to the truths of the other world; for a spiritual blurriness or inconsistency or (worse) falsehood could inflict irreparable damage upon one or more Christian souls, just as (on the other hand) its spiritual truth could help strengthen someone's soul.

An icon must conform—"in imagery, likeness, and essence"—to the authentic images of spiritual existence. Otherwise, the Holy Church cannot be certain that one or another of Her vital organs will not go dead. In this light, the ecclesiastical function of those specially appointed wardens of iconpainting is very clear: to accept truth-telling icons and to reject the false-speaking ones. In fact, an icon becomes truly an icon only after the Church recognizes that the image in it corresponds to its living spiritual Prototype; in other words, it is an icon only after She truly names it. And the act of true naming—i.e., of establishing the self-identity of the person in the icon—belongs *only to the Church;* and were an iconpainter to write on an icon a name not so given in the Church's teaching (without which an icon cannot truly be an icon), then it would be essentially the same as signing a legal document with not your own but with someone else's name. If I understand the practice correctly, an examination by an icon-warden always concluded (if affirmative) with the warden himself, with the bishop's blessing, writing the name of the saint on the icon itself; and evidence of this practice can be seen on the many old icons which have attached to them metal plates with the saints' names quickly, even carelessly written in charcoal and oil—writing surely not done by the iconpainters themselves. It has something of the air of an executive's signature on correspondence composed by an intelligent secretary.

We might naturally conclude, then, that such a signature functions as the censor's seal of approval. But it is far more than that, for it is not enough merely to verify (or reject) icons after they have been made; the deeper question is: if eternity must be witnessed in and through the icon, can this occur through the

work of someone who is himself alienated from true spirituality? This is precisely the point at which the Church, in considering not merely the work but the whole life of an iconpainter, will come to view disregard of spiritual rule as devastating to the very integrity of the iconpainting cult. Hence, the ascetic demands placed upon iconpainters in the matter of their personal lives; hence, too, the precise formulation given these demands in the 43rd chapter of the document known as the 100-Chapters Council, a formulation articulated when Russian iconpainting had already reached its supreme heights:

> Let this be read in the royal city of Moscow and in all the cities, as the Czar so advises, to all metropolitans, archbishops, and bishops: for the protection of all the orders of the Church, but pre-eminently for the holy icons and the iconpainters and other orders, that all and every may be protected as befits the sacred precepts; and that also it may be made known what the iconpainter shall be, what diligence he shall possess, so as to depict in earthly images Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and His Most Pure Mother, and all the heavenly Powers, and all the saints who have been in all ages well pleasing to God.
>
> Let it be known, then, that the iconpainter shall be meek, humble, and reverent, neither filled with vain talk, nor empty laughter, not quarrelsome, not envious,not a drinker of spirits, not a thief nor a murderer; and above all things, that he shall sustain in great mindfulness a pure chastity of soul and body, and that if he cannot sustain a pure chastity of body, he shall marry a wife by the lawful sacrament of matrimony; and that always and everywhere the iconpainters shall attend constantly to their spiritual fathers, telling them everything always and living always according to their teachings about fasting and prayer and all the ascetic disciplines, doing so with neither embarrassment nor willfulness, and with always the true wisdom of humility; and that they shall with great diligence make the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ, of His Most Pure Mother, of all the holy apostles and prophets, of all the holy hierarchs and martyrs, and of all the righteous women and holy fathers, each and every according to the "image and likeness" of the most divine essence, looking always to the images of the ancient iconpainters and always drawing from that good treasure-house of their most excellent example.

> Let it be also known that if it shall be that a master-artist who has given solemn oath to live in this very way, observing truly all these commandments of God and working diligently in all these labors of God, shall accomplish the will of God in all of these things, then shall the Czar express gratitude to this master-artist, and the all-hierarchs of the Church shall grant great protection to him and in every way shall regard him as elevated above all ordinary persons; and, further, that this master-artist shall accept disciples, examining them in all things and teaching them every devotion and chastity, and shall lead them in unto his own spiritual father; whereupon the spiritual father, in turn, according to the canons given him by the hierarchs, shall instruct the disciples in how the Christian shall, by abandoning every self-willfulness, live in every humility; so that from their masters the disciples may truly learn. And if it please God that He shall reveal the art of true iconpainting to one disciple or more, then shall the master lead this disciple in unto the hierarch who, after examining carefully the work of the disciple and discerning its accordance with the holy "image and likeness" of God, and after determining that the disciple lives in every obedience and chastity of life and in full and humble accordance with every commandment of God, shall then bless the disciple and instruct him to continue in this life of devotion and to sustain in all diligence this great labor of God, therein granting to the disciple the like honor his teacher bears in being exalted above all ordinary persons.
>
> Further, let it be that, after the hierarch shall instruct the master not to defend any disciple whomsoever it be—whether the master's own son or his brother or anyone thus close to him—to whom God did not grant the true work of the holy art, if it shall be that the master take the work of such disciples who have begun to fashion wrong icons and to live in wrong fashion and, telling falsehoods by proclaiming the bad disciples' great worth, he shall then display the work of another as the fruit of the bad disciples' labors, then shall the hierarch, having learned of all this, put this lying master under fair prohibition, so that every other iconpainter will go in great fear and not dare do the same thing, and so that even those bad disciples will not dare even to touch the fruit of another's labor.
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> Also, let it be that, if God reveal to one disciple or more the true teaching of iconpainting such that these disciples begin to live in full accordance with the commandments of God, and if it so be that the master in

jealousy's fierce grip begin then to blame such reverent disciples, then shall the hierarch, having learned of all this, put this jealous master under fair prohibition and give to these good disciples every great honor.

Again, let it be that, if some master in the art hide away his knowledge and not give the art's very essence unto his disciples, such a master shall—like the man Our Lord speaks of as burying away his talent—be condemned by God Himself into eternal torment; and if either some master or some disciple begin to live in unholy ways, in drinking of spirits or in licentiousness or in self-willful pride, then shall the hierarch put them all under fair prohibition, and he shall separate them from every holy work in the icons, commanding them all not even to touch the tiniest part of it, under the terror of the revealed word that cursed be they who do the good work of God in the evil of carelessness.

And, again, let prohibition fall upon any who attempt to make icons without sacred study, fashioning them not by sacred image but by the self-willed imagination of their own unlettered hearts, and who then attempt to sell or exchange them to and with the unknowing and the simple; and let it be commanded that such ones begin to study with the good masters of the art; and if it shall be that some, by God's grace, begin then to make icons by image, these ones shall continue in the art; but if it should be that God not grant them the art, such ones shall cease all their work so that the sacred Name of God may not be disgraced by such work; and if it so be that they refuse to cease all their work, let the Czar in his anger punish all such ones; and if they lament that it be their one livelihood, let them not be heard in this sinful complaint, for they see not their sin in their ignoring God's grace in giving only a few the gift of true icon-working; and say also to them that God, in His wisdom, has granted to men many arts and crafts wherein they may find their livelihood but that the image of God may not be disgraced by their hands.

Also, let it be known that the archbishops and bishops in every city and village, and in every monastery under their care, shall personally examine every master of the art, both his life and his art; and when he finds, in his jurisdiction, the supremely good master, then he shall command such a master to supervise all the other iconpainters so that, among them, there not be any bad ones; and, further, that the archbishops and bishops shall equally inquire into and equally well care for

the wardens of the icons; for in this fashion shall the iconpainters be rightly protected and honored above all ordinary persons, that every man, of either mean or high estate, shall reverence such artists and render them honor for their sacred iconpainting.

And, lastly, let it be known that the hierarchs in each their own jurisdiction shall exercise great diligence in assuring that the every master and disciple, out of their own mind and ideas, shall not ever fashion an icon that attempts to depict the invisible Godhead Himself, for Christ Our Lord shall be shown in the flesh, not in the Godhead....

These teachings on the iconpainter's high calling were, of course, not confined to one city cathedral at one period of time. Throughout the whole history of Christendom we find the handbooks of iconpainting suggesting, for example, even in such apparently routine matters as cleaning and inspecting old icons that:

Do not conduct these tasks carelessly and inattentively but with reverence and the fear of God, because these are tasks pleasing to God.

A work entitled *Hermeneia,* or *Instructions in the Art,* by the iconpainter and hieromonk Dionysius of Fourna, codifies and expounds the teachings of Panselinos' school. Dionysius begins with clearly stating his sense of spiritual responsibility that has led him to compose the present manual. The *Hermeneia* gives exact and full instructions, step by step, on the entire process of iconpainting: drawing the pattern; making charcoal, glue and gesso; gessoing the icon board; building up the haloes in the icon; gessoing the entire iconostasis; preparing the poliments and gilding the icons and iconostasis; preparing the sankir (flesh color); applying the highlights and painting the garments; and so on—including how to mix pigments for different colors, what are the true proportions of the human body, how to do frescos, and how to renovate older icons. But that is not by any means all. Dionysius also gives a complete pattern-book in which he explains in full detail how to compose the figures from the Old Testament texts as well as the figures of the Greek philosophers. He also tells how to compose the figures not only from the

Gospels, Acts and Epistles but also those from Jesus' parables; and he tells how to distinguish iconographically the Apocalypse from the Second Coming. He also discusses the iconpainting details of the feasts of the Theotokos, the imagery of the Akathists, the historical feasts of the Church, didactic and miraculous images, and, last of all, he gives detailed instruction in fresco composition: where and what should be depicted in a church of this or that style. This rich *Hermeneia* concludes with the dogmatic foundations of iconpainting wherein Dionysius discusses the ancient Church traditions about the features of both Our Saviour's Face and the Holy Mother's, about the position of the blessing hand in an icon, and about what words should be written in which icon. At the very end, Dionysius concludes with his own brief prayer:

> To the Creator of all goodness, to our God, thanksgiving! Having finished this book I say, Glory to You, O God! Again I say, Glory to You, O God! And again I say, Glory to You, O our God of all creation!

Such is the richly harmonious content of this high and magisterial *Hermeneia*. But, reader, I ask you: do you not feel that something here is missing? Do not all these exact and full instructions feel suspended in air, self-enclosed and detached from the true order of iconpainting? For what is missing in all these technical details is their absolutely necessary condition: prayer. The *Hermeneia* would indeed be empty if it had not been the fact that, in this account, I silently passed over the actual beginning of the book. For here, in full, are Dionysius' preliminary instructions to anyone who "wishes to learn the art":

> If anyone wishes to learn the art of iconpainting, let them begin by practicing drawing for a time, without concern for proportions, until the skill of drawing becomes an acquired habit. Then let the novice approach the priest, to have prayers said before the icon Hodegetria (the Directress of the Way) on his behalf. The priest must say the prayers "Blessed is our God," "O Heavenly King" and the rest of the Trisagion, and then, after the megalynarion of the Holy Mother and the troparion of the Transfiguration, the priest should make the sign of the cross upon the head of the novice and loudly chant "Let us pray to the Lord," and then continue with the following prayer: "O Lord Jesus Christ our God, infinite in Thy divinity who, inexpressibly incarnate through Mary the Virgin Mother, became finite for our salvation; who imprinted the sacred shape of Thine immaculate face on the holy veil and, by means of this, healed the illness of Abgar and enlightened his soul with the full knowledge of God; who through Thy Holy Spirit brought such wisdom to the Holy Apostle and Evangelist Luke that he could depict Thy wholly sinless Mother who held Thee in Her arms saying, 'May the grace of Him who is born of me be given to this image through me'—the same way, O God and Master of all things, enlighten and bring wisdom to the soul and heart and mind of this Thy servant [name] and so direct these hands that they may depict—most perfectly beyond all reproach—the forms of Thy person, of Thine All-Holy Mother, and of all the saints; to do so to the glory, splendor and beauty of Thy holy church, and for the remission of the sins of all who truly revere and devoutly kiss and so bring honor to Her; and protect, O Lord, this Thy servant from all demonic wiles as he diligently follows in his work the sacred commands of Thy ministers, of Thy Holy Mother, of the holy apostle and evangelist Luke, and of all the saints. Amen." Then closing prayer and dismissal. After this order of prayer, let the student now begin to draw the holy faces in their exact shape and appearance, practicing for a long period of time with full attentiveness. Then, with the help of God, the student will come to fully understand the true work of iconpainting. For I have seen this happen in my students.

Dionysius says that he writes all this solely for the benefit of his "fellow artists in Christ," from whom he asks their prayers for him. And he speaks with grateful love a word "to a student":

> Know, my diligent student, that when the moment arrives when you shall plunge into this great art, you must search tirelessly to find an experienced teacher, one you will come to appreciate deeply if he teaches you in the very way I have outlined to you here.

Thus, Dionysius sees what the whole community of iconpainters everywhere and always affirms: the successful accomplishment of iconpainting technique depends entirely upon the iconpainter's devotion to prayer. Such is the clear air of a master iconographer and iconpainter in the first half of the eighteenth century, a period when all life—including ecclesiastical life—had fallen into

a secularization of terrible harshness. Nevertheless, this devout spirit and unique consciousness has persisted uninterrupted among iconpainters into our own time, a spirit and consciousness sometimes informing whole villages wherein, from one generation to the next, there has passed this spiritual self-awareness of being workers in a high and sacred task, a self-awareness accompanied by the transmission of semi-secret techniques of iconpainting, of divine processes of working. It is a unique and enclosed world of witnesses. And if it has remained so into our time, then we have great difficulty even imagining rightly that spirit-bearing atmosphere whence, in antiquity (when the whole of earthly life was set in order), there flowed into the whole ecclesiastical body that manifestation of divine beauty whose spiritual principles were and are the unshakable axis that was and is the Holy Mysteries of Christ.

A Dialogue with Sophia Ivanova

The History of Artistic Technique, Western and Iconic

There is nothing accidental in the organization of sacred custom: neither in the iconic forms nor in the lives of the iconpainters. It is quite incorrect to assert that the cultic order employs either iconic forms or iconpainters from beyond itself, unaware that they represent its own powers. Rather, the cult in itself serves to reveal the sacred faces and, again in itself, to guide the lives of the iconpainters. Plainly, then, the holy images of iconpainting are incarnated by these servants of the Church through the use of artistic strategies that are in no way alien to the cultic metaphysics or that employ media which do not flow from the sacred purpose. Concerning the cult, neither the techniques nor the materials themselves are accidental; none of them may be understood as having simply arrived—in the accidents of history—inside the Church, as if any of them could be painlessly and easily replaced by other techniques and other materials. We would not so think

in relation to any other art form, that any artistic concept could be executed with any artistic technique or material, as if materials and techniques were somehow arbitrarily connected with artistic ideas and concepts, somehow extrinsic to esthetic essences. How much more so, then, should we see nothing whatever accidental, subjective or capricious about the techniques and materials of that art wherein is revealed the spiritual nature of all humanity. The field of this art is therefore bounded in itself in ways beyond any comparison to any other human art, for nothing alien—no "alien fire"—could ever be placed on its sacred altar. It is impossible, then, to conceive even as a purely esthetic experiment an icon composed in an alien technique with alien materials: it could not possibly be an icon. But this impossibility becomes vividly clear when we consider the spiritual essence of the icon. The artistic strategies and tactics of iconpainting, i.e., the materials used and the ways of technically using them, are the metaphysical modalities by which the icon possesses incarnate life. The materials and techniques of an art—any art—are symbolic: for each single one of them possesses its own concretely determined metaphysical aliveness through which it corresponds to a unique spiritual fact.

But even granting all this, consider the matter on some purely empirical issue of artistic surfaces (affirming, of course, that there can be nothing superficial that does not also possess inward manifestation). The issue we shall consider is the consistency of the paint. If we think about the surfaces of iconpainting—about the exact biology and physics of the artistic surfaces (i.e., their chemical and physical natures), about what precisely coheres the color-pigments as well as their chemical constituents; if we think about what various dissolvents and varnishes exactly do in the icon; if, in short, we think about all the myriad *material causes* operating in any art, then we are already directly engaged in reflecting upon that profoundly metaphysical disposition which the creative will expresses in and as its wholeness. It may well be that the artist will deploy these so-called material causes instinc-

a secularization of terrible harshness. Nevertheless, this devout spirit and unique consciousness has persisted uninterrupted among iconpainters into our own time, a spirit and consciousness sometimes informing whole villages wherein, from one generation to the next, there has passed this spiritual self-awareness of being workers in a high and sacred task, a self-awareness accompanied by the transmission of semi-secret techniques of iconpainting, of divine processes of working. It is a unique and enclosed world of witnesses. And if it has remained so into our time, then we have great difficulty even imagining rightly that spirit-bearing atmosphere whence, in antiquity (when the whole of earthly life was set in order), there flowed into the whole ecclesiastical body that manifestation of divine beauty whose spiritual principles were and are the unshakable axis that was and is the Holy Mysteries of Christ.

A Dialogue with Sophia Ivanova

The History of Artistic Technique, Western and Iconic

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tively, moving subconsciously as he fashions this or that artistic pattern or focus; but such instinctive and subconscious movements not only do not gainsay the deeper metaphysics of creativity; on the contrary, they compel us to see in creativity something far beyond the merely mental arbitrariness of rational choice; to see, rather, the way wherein the powers of creativity continue the primary activity of organic organization, that activity through and in and of which the physical body is itself woven. We may say, then, that the choice of media, of the material causes set in motion within an art work, is not a choice made in the arbitrariness of individuality—not even if we say that the artist is choosing from far within the inward depths of his being; rather, the choice is solely made by the mind of history, by that collective mind of nations operating in time to shape the entire artistic style of an age. Thus, we may be quite correct in saying that artistic style and artistic materials are two circles that everywhere intersect; for we know assuredly that the material causes of a given work of art express far more fully the beliefs of an age than does any concept of style deduced merely from the shared characteristics, or common denominator, of the most popular art forms.

Is it not completely clear to us that the sounds of purely instrumental music—even the sound of the full organ—are wholly alien to an Orthodox liturgical service? Even apart from their role in a given composition, such sounds are impossible in an Orthodox church. This clear impossibility arises directly from our sense of taste, completely apart from any theoretical considerations, because the sounds of instrumental music conflict in our consciousness with the whole style of the Orthodox services, breaking apart their self-integrated wholeness even if we consider the services as merely artistic unities: isn't this completely clear? For isn't it clear that these sounds, taken solely by themselves, are far too remote from the precision, the comprehension, the verbal and intellectual energies of the Orthodox services to become the material basis of their sonic art? Don't we clearly experience the

sounds of the organ as too slow, submerged and alien, too engulfed in the darknesses of human nature, for the crystalline transparency of Orthodox liturgical life? I am attempting in this not to judge but to comprehend the issue of deeper stylistic integrity; whether my comprehension is wholly accepted or entirely rejected is, finally, of no consequence to me.

"But you are talking about organ sounds now when I thought you wanted to be talking about the visual arts. Have you completely forgotten: isn't this essay supposed to be about iconpainting?"

Yes, of course, but the sounds of the organ are not at all irrelevant. Please, let me go on, and you'll see why I'm thinking on these lines. So, about the organ:

It is a musical instrument intimately connected to that particular historical period and culture called the Renaissance. In talking about Western Catholicism, most people usually forget that the Roman Church before and after the Renaissance are two vastly different things. For in the Renaissance, the Roman Church survived a very grave illness wherein it gained certain immunities but suffered immense losses, for the price it paid for the few immunities it gained was the distortion of the whole of spiritual life. It is therefore very doubtful whether medieval Catholic culture would even recognize post-Renaissance Catholicism; and all of modern Western European culture derives precisely from this post-Renaissance Catholicism. And the essential sonic expression of this Catholicism is the organ sound; thus, it is by no means an accident that the production of organs flourishes in the second half of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth: the period, that is, most fully manifesting and expressing the essence of Renaissance culture. I am not attempting here merely to draw an analogy; no, I am reaching for a far more deeply grounded relation—

"Let me guess: are you trying to connect the sound of the Renaissance organ with the oil paint on a Renaissance canvas?"

Exactly right. The very consistency of oil paint has an obvious affinity with the oily-syrupy sound of the organ; and the flatness and liquidity of oil colors inwardly connects them to the sonic liquidities of the organ. Both the colors and the sounds are wholly of earth and flesh. Historically, the art of Renaissance oil painting develops exactly at the point when the art of building organs and composing for them flourishes most strongly; here, then, beyond all shadow of a doubt, are two material causes arising from the same metaphysical root; for both Renaissance painting and the art of the organ express the identical attitude in varying spheres—

"Wait a moment. Let me try again to put this essay back on the track it began on, figurative arts. You said before that artistic materials have intrinsic artistic meanings, including the very surface on which the paint is applied. I think it'd be just about impossible to give an example of that. I mean, if a surface is completely covered with painted imagery, and the surface becomes invisible, then it can have no relationship whatever with anything like the artistic spirit of a given era; and therefore that surface can be replaced by any other surface (provided, of course, that the new surface can take the paint without peeling). In other words, the meaning of a surface is entirely technical and not stylistic."

No, that's not exactly right—in fact, it's not right at all. The properties of a surface strongly determine the way one applies the paint and even the paint itself. You cannot put just any paint whatever on any given surface—you can't put oils on thin paper nor water-colors on metal. But more than that: the character of a brush stroke is determined entirely by the nature of the surface, and from the stroke arises the whole esthetic texture of the painting. And far more deeply than that: through the texture created by the stroke, and through the textural construction created by all the colors, that underlying surface which is the painting's primary plane becomes manifest. Still further: in becoming manifest, that

primary plane which is the surface is visibly revealed to a degree far greater than before the color was applied. While the surface is bare, its essential properties are asleep; when the paint is put on it, it awakens:—it is exactly the same as clothing that, by covering the body, reveals the underlying physical structure far more fully than would a direct gaze at the naked body, for the complicated folds of the clothing can reveal the body's surface irregularities in ways no direct observation ever could. Firm or soft; pliably resilient or actually flabby; smooth or rough and uneven; by one property or another absorbing the paint or resisting it; and so on—every property of the underlying surface becomes intensified and magnified when transfigured into the texture of the work. Moreover, every underlying surface property creates in the manifest texture a dynamic equivalent; that is, what was hidden, passive, and inert in the surface becomes in the texture a source of power that invades what surrounds it. In the same way that the iron filings will make the magnet's invisible force-field become something we can see, so too in the painting: what is static in the bare surface becomes dynamic once the colors are applied; and the more perfect the work of art, the more this dynamic of manifesting declares itself. The more acute and perfective the intelligence at work in the artist's hand, the more this intelligence understands—beyond mere ratiocination—the essential metaphysics of all the interactive forces operating in the figurative surface; and the more deeply the hand's perfective intelligence is penetrated by this essential metaphysics, the more it can discern in these interactive forces its own spiritual structure and its own metaphysical style (provided, of course, that the intelligence has in fact chosen materials that accord with the true demands of its style). Once it has comprehended the dynamic structure of the surface, the hand's perfective intelligence can manifest it in and through the texture of the brush strokes. Such manifestation occurs when the raw materials and the artist's intention stylistically correspond; but when they do not, when the predetermined nature of things

intrinsically precludes such a correspondence, then the perfective intelligence will identify this fact in the activities of the surface, and the artist will reject the surface as inappropriate and alien. Thus, the metaphysics of the figurative surface—

"I'm sorry, I must interrupt. I have to ask you, do you really see in a piece of canvas, stretched on a frame, something like the entire spirit of Renaissance art? I mean, it seems as though the canvas, for you, is some sort of total history, something that can bring into parallel both organ music and oil painting."

Is it possible for you to—well, I don't want to say *think* but something more expressive: is it possible for you to *feel* differently? The way the artist's hand *moves,* its characteristic *motion* in applying paint, doing it over and over: this motion is connected to inner life; and if this characteristic movement for some reason does not correspond to inner life, thereby conflicting with it, then it must inevitably be changed—and changed not merely in the practice of one artist but in the artistic practice of a whole people, nation, and history. Is it even conceivable that thousands of artists for dozens of centuries somehow, during all their nearly countless artistic lives, moved their hands in ways and rhythms that had no inward connection with their souls? The choice is obvious: either the figurative surface will possess the capacity to generate its own rhythmic dynamics in such a way that the artist—individually or historically—must submit to that surface dynamics and thereby risk not becoming what he, in the structure of his highest spiritual calling, could become; or else the artist—again, individually or historically—will insist on the primacy of his own rhythm and find a new surface whose properties correspond to his rhythm. An artist must either submit to the given surface or else find a new one; for it is beyond anyone's powers to alter the metaphysics of an existing surface.

Now, concerning canvas: the stretched surface of it, resilient yet pliable, responsive to the slightest touch, makes it dynamically

equal to the artist's hand. He engages it as his brother, consciously apprehending it as a living organism and, moreover, as something that can be turned and directed in any way he wishes, for its illumination is wholly dependent upon the artist's will, and it can relate to its surrounding only as he himself desires. The icon board: immovable, hard, unbending, it is far too strict, obligatory, and ontological for the hand of the Renaissance artist—for he is looking for the way to realize himself solely among earthly appearances, without the obstacle of another world; and his hand craves the feeling of autonomy, of being a law unto himself, and so his hand does not want to be disturbed by encountering something that does not submit to his will. The icon board's unyielding surface can only remind him of those other strongholds he would much prefer to forget. For naturalistic images, for depicting a world free of God and Church where he is his own law entirely—such a world demands the greatest possible *sensuous liquidity,* a world where all the images proclaim their manifest sensuousness as loudly as possible, a world where these images are placed not on a firm but on a highly unstable surface—a surface whose instability expresses the very unsteadiness of all earthly things. Perhaps the Renaissance artist, and the whole of Renaissance esthetic culture, never consciously think about what I am saying here; but his hand—and the collective hand of the culture—think unceasingly about nothing else: about the relativism of all existence, about how the ontology of all things is displaced by the sensuous and dissolving phenomenology of all things, and about how human beings—as relative, nonontological phenomena—*alone have the right* to establish laws in this world of shifting metaphysical delusions.

The classical Renaissance perspective arises necessarily from the Renaissance self-understanding. I cannot here explore it in any great detail; but I can say this: typically in this outlook, there is combined a sensuous brightness with an ontological instability of existence, a combination that finds its most exact artistic expression in an art of

liquid instabilities, an art that finds its most perfect technical expression in the act of applying oil paint onto a stretched canvas.

"And so (if I follow you correctly) you would also see a connection between the art of engraving and this whole worldview —is that right? And yet the art of engraving is rooted in the soil of Protestantism, and the greatest graphic artists all develop in the various Protestant sects. I think especially of Germany and England—here is rooted the culture of engraving and etching and printmaking and similar arts. Yet doesn't engraving also take root in Catholicism? I guess I am asking myself this question, not you; essentially, I find myself agreeing with what you are saying."

Certainly engraving is rooted in both Protestantism and Catholicism. But how remarkable it is that, in Catholicism, engraving and the related arts do not seek to be genuinely *graphic,* and so they therefore engage not in the tasks of engraving but in the tasks of oil painting. In their work, the Catholic engravers and printmakers use broad strokes that directly imitate the oil painter's brush strokes, trying to create effects of color not in a linear fashion but in the wide, flat bands which the oil painter uses, thereby essentially abandoning the true work of the graphic arts; for in the graphic arts, paint serves only to distinguish one surface area from another and not, strictly speaking, to create color—whereas the flat band creates if not exactly color at least something very like it. In the true practice of engraving in Protestant culture, the line is wholly abstract, without either width or color. Unlike the brush strokes in an oil painting, where each stroke attempts to become the sensuous double of the thing depicted (at least in part if not entirely), the lines in an engraving seek to be free of even the least touch of what is sensuously given. If an oil painting is the manifestation of sensuousness, then an engraving manifests the intellectual construction of images from elements wholly unlike the elements in the object being depicted; i.e., from the rational intellect's combining of various affirmations and negations. The

engraving is therefore a schematic image constructed on the axioms of logic (identity, contradiction, the excluded third, and so on); and, in this sense, engraving has a profound connection to German philosophy, for, in both, the essential and definitive act is the deductive determination of reality solely through the logic of affirmation and negation, a logic with neither sensuous nor spiritual connections—in short, the task in both is to create everything from nothing. Such is the true aim of engraving, and the more purely it attains its goal—i.e., without either sensuous or psychological insight—the more definitive its perfection as an engraving is revealed. But notice the practice in Catholic countries: there is the ceaseless attempt to slip the sensuous into the logic of affirmation and negation. And so, yes, I agree that the art of engraving has an inner affinity with Protestantism. And I say again: just as there is this inner affinity between Protestant rationalism and the figurative linearity of engraving, so there is also an inner affinity between Catholic esthetic imagination and the sensuous techniques of oil painting. Protestant rationalist art wants to schematize its object by reconstructing it through a process of logical clarification that, in itself, possesses neither color nor two-dimensionality. An engraving wholly recreates its image along lines that have no relation to sensuous perception, and it does so in such a way that the image's whole structure, shadows and all (i.e., the structure not only as the image's essence but also as all its living contextual surroundings), would be schematically manifested by a number of rationally determined dimensions in space, with the result that there would be in the image nothing else except these rational dimensions and their correlations.

Now, it is a truism to note that German idealist philosophy (especially Kant) eliminated sensuous space from philosophic thought. But were Kant and Hegel, Fichte and Cohen, doing anything other than what Dürer had done in engraving? Not at all. Consider once more the juxtaposition of the engraved line and the brush stroke. The brush stroke is not (like the line) trying to

reconstruct the image but to imitate it, in effect to *replace* the object not by rationally reconfiguring it but by sensualizing its image so that the object in the painting becomes something more imaginatively surprising than the object in reality. The brush stroke seeks to surpass the figurative surface of the canvas and to enter into the sensuousness directly given to the touches of paint or to the colored relief or to the painted statue; in short, the brush stroke imitates the image by interposing itself for the object, thereby entering into life not by symbolic but by empirical factors. The outer limit, then, toward which the art of oil painting tends can be seen in all the Catholic madonnas dressed in those brightly popular clothes. On the other hand, the outer limit of the art of engraving may be (if we sharpen our thought in caricature-fashion) discerned in a purely geometrical pattern or even in a differential equation.

"But I still don't see the meaning (in the sense we saw earlier) of the figurative surface in the art of engraving. I mean, I see the surface of the engraving as somehow *accidental,* as something not connected with the master engraver's whole way of working. I see now that oil paint cannot be used on any surface without that surface reflecting its whole character. All this is clear now. But this isn't at all the case in engraving. For an engraving can be printed on almost any surface whatever without changing the character of the print (except maybe slightly)—whether on a variety of different kinds of paper, or on silk, or ivory, or wood, or parchment, or stone, or even metal—it is all the same in regard to the engraving's *artistic* structure. More than that, even the paint in an engraving is more or less indifferent if it can be replaced by another paint—if not by a different color at least by a different consistency. So given these two *conditional* characteristics of the engraving's primary material causes—namely, surface and paint—I am beginning to doubt everything you have been saying; though I'm sure you have noticed that I've taken up your whole style of thinking..."

But I think it's just the opposite; it's only that you're not following through with the ideas you've well begun. Consider: in this freedom to choose the surface and the paint, engraving manifests that very deception at the heart of Protestantism—its cry for freedom of conscience in its denial of the Church tradition—more: in its denial of the universally human tradition. What are we given by the printmaker's plate? A piece of paper, the least durable thing imaginable, for it can be crumpled or torn easily, it absorbs water, it burns instantly, it grows moldy, it cannot even be cleaned—in short, the symbol of earthly corruption; and it is upon this, the most perishable of all surfaces, that we see the engraver's strokes. If we ask, are the strokes actually done on the paper, we know that, of course, they are not. Yet look at the lines: they plainly show that they have been drawn on a very hard surface, one attacked and torn and deeply cut by the engraver's sharp knife. Thus, in the print, the visual appearance of the engraved strokes wholly contradicts the actual properties of the printed surface; and this contradiction serves to make us forget these properties and to assume that the paper is, in fact, very hard. In the esthetics of the circumstance, then, we attribute to the paper a durability far exceeding what it possesses in reality. And that attribution, in turn, makes us suppose that, because the strokes on the paper are not really deep, the engraver's power is immeasurably greater than it is: for we see that his hand, in encountering the extremely hard surface of the plate, was not conquered and did not shake but remained inflexibly strong. And so the impression arises that the engraver does not introduce material changes into the surface but, instead, demonstrates the "pure" (in the Kantian sense) reconstructive act of form-creating and that, therefore, this form can (again, as in Kant) be easily accepted by any surface. And so it comes to seem that the engraver's creation of forms exceeds the boundaries of the material he works in and that, therefore, his creation is pure in possessing absolute freedom to choose—even arbitrarily—this or that sur-

face. *But exactly this is the deception.* To understand it, let us begin with the fact that what we call the engraving is not the thing that was engraved. In the precise sense of the word, the engraving is the metal or wooden plate; but we substitute for it the print; and so when we speak about the engraving, we are actually *thinking* about the print. This confusion is no accident. Now, in the plate, the texture of the art work is not something arbitrarily chosen by the engraver but is, instead, the necessary consequence arising from the properties of the plate's surface; for in the plate there is not the slightest trace of those esthetic deceptions we described before.

Historically, this clarity is how engraving first happened. In the beginning, the art of engraving was the art of carving on metal and wood (sometimes on stone); it had nothing at all to do with printing. There was produced an art object, i.e., a surface covered with engraved images; but there was no piece of paper. What we call an engraving originates in a mere technique: after covering a carved surface with ink or paint, it was pressed onto a piece of paper—and, lo and behold, a print. But that print was not originally the aim of the art; now, however, we see the process of making the plate as mere preparation—whereas, originally, the print was made solely in order to have an exact copy of the carving in the eventuality of the engraver's wanting to reproduce it. This original circumstance in engravings can be seen today in certain of our woodcarvers—for example, the famous Khrustachevs of Sergiev Posad, a father and his sons—where they take photographs of their remarkable works before they deliver them to the people who commissioned them.

"Yes, the distinction between the engraving and the print has been badly distorted—the first is indeed the art work, for the engraved plate, even if reproducible, is always creative, while the other, the print, is merely the matrix for generating exact repetitions. We have it the other way about: the mechanically reproduced print has become for us the art work itself, while the engraving has come to seem the reproductive matrix, something only the printer himself cares about."

Let's explain our thinking on all this by drawing up a table on the origins of engraving:

1 The starting point is the *tesserae hospitales* of antiquity, called in ancient culture 'symbols,' which meant 'broken things,' whose halves served as tokens of pledges. The broken coins of lovers, etc. (Sir Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* has a fine example).

2. Pre-cut objects used as receipts or tickets, examples of which include the small wooden sticks used in the Yaroslavl and Tambovsk provinces here in Russia (as in the Yaroslavl Museum); also, the Chinese bamboo sticks.

3. Khan's mark (i.e., footprinting in Chinese culture); fingerprinting in the legal and record-keeping systems; etc.

4. Seal imprinted on wax, including lead-relief.

5. Ornamental carvings on wood and metal.

6. Seal imprinted on charcoal or paint.

7. Color proof-prints used to keep a copy of an engraving.

8. Finally, entirely self-sufficient prints, metal engravings, and woodcuts as instances of graphic art.

"All this, I think, is quite clear. But (picking up where we left off), what is it that explicitly connects engraving and Protestantism?"

It is this: the artistic freedom to arbitrarily choose the surface (i.e, paper, wood, and so on) and the paint corresponds to Protestant individualism and freedom—or, more precisely, to Protestant arbitrariness; but then, upon these arbitrarily chosen materials, the supposedly Pure Reason (i.e., total rationality stripped of any sensuous dimension) draws its graphic schemata of reality, either religious or empirical. These schemata are placed on materials that have nothing in common with them, thereby revealing Reason's

freedom of self-determination: and so Reason comes to enslave the reason of everything surrounding it, for, in exercising its freedom of self-determination, it violates the self-determination of the world; while, in proclaiming its own law, it thinks it unnecessary to attend to that law whereby all things in creation become authentically real. Protestant individualism is thus a mechanical imprinting of its own engraved plate upon all existent beings, a plate with no content whatever, constructed entirely through binary logic. But this Protestant freedom of choice is, in fact, delusion: for it is not the process of applying wise spiritual understanding to the unique activities of individual beings (as is authentic creative freedom, flexibly conforming itself to given realities); no, Protestant freedom does not apply itself to unique individual beings but, instead, simply and wholly neglects them, for it has prepared in advance of any encounter a stamp, or seal, which must be printed without the least differentiation upon every single soul it meets. Protestant freedom is thus an attempt at tyranny using the words of freedom, words like a song permanently cut into the grooves of a record—

"And what's the instrument it cuts with?"

I think your real question is: what is the inner faculty used by the Protestant spirit and how does it connect to the engraver's knife and the etcher's needle?

"Exactly."

Reason is the unique faculty of Protestantism; perhaps better, reason is the faculty it always *proclaims* as uniquely its own. For others, Reason is not uniquely Protestant, that it is the very intellect of humankind and not merely a Protestant faculty. For Protestants themselves, Reason is something like the imagination, something operating far more passionately than it does in Catholicism, something burning with the spiritual fires of *prelest*, something struggling against a surface that is immeasurably more ontological than it is in Catholicism.

"But just where are these (as you call it) spiritual fires of imagination?"

What do you mean, *where?* Do you mean you have never noticed that impetuous fantasizing called systematic philosophy which springs from Protestant soil? Boehm and Husserl are obvious examples, for in general all Protestant philosophers first build castles in the air from nothing at all, and then they harden them into steel so as to make fetters for all the living flesh of the world. Even Hegal, dry as dust, writes in such a state of drunken intellectual rage that Jean's remark is not at all a mere witticism: in the intoxication caused by nitrous oxide, one will perceive and think of the world in Hegalian fashion. Protestant philosophy is the situation of being completely drunk oneself while compelling everyone else to be sober.

"But let's go back to our starting point: not oil painting and engraving as such but iconpainting. What is the inner connection in iconpainting, how do its technical properties connect to its spiritual tasks?"

In a word, iconpainting is the metaphysics of existence—but a concrete, not an abstract, metaphysics. Where the oil painting will express the world in sensuous images, and the Protestant engraving will give us the world in rational schemata, the icon makes visually manifest the metaphysical essence of the event or person it depicts. And where the techniques of oil painting and engraving developed in response to their respective cultural imperatives and thus represent, in themselves, the distillations of searches carried on entirely within the terms of their given cultures, the techniques of iconpainting arise wholly from the need to express the concrete metaphysicality of the world. Thus, in iconpainting (if I may be permitted to say, without offense, something essentially true and necessary), not only are there no empirical accidents, there are also no metaphysical accidents.

Therefore the world's sinfulness and perishability should not be considered as merely empirical accidents, as things spoiling the world; instead, when considered in relation to the world's divinely created spiritual essence, sinfulness and perishability are metaphysical accidents without need or necessity; for we can discern in them nothing whatever of earth's essentiality but only its passing circumstances. And iconpainting does not seek to express these circumstances, for they only overshadow the true nature of things; instead, iconpainting's true subject is this very nature itself, the world created by God in its transworldly beauty. Everything depicted in the icon, all the details, constitute the image, or reflexive representation (ἐκτύπωμα), of the prototypical world of sacred beings.

"But granting that idea to be generally true, mustn't we immediately add some qualifying word or other, like 'in general' or 'essentially' everything in the icon reflects the prototypical world? I mean, even for Plato the question arose of whether or not the 'Idea of one hair' existed. If an icon represents a contemplation upon an idea, then isn't the idea to be comprehended in the icon's total significance, while the details—life events, body structure, architecture, landscape, and so on—are external and accidental in the sense that they are, in relation to the total idea, devices for expressing that idea? Let me give an example. The garments in an icon don't have metaphysical meaning, do they? Aren't they depicted so as to give the icon its intricate, beautiful and expressive areas of color? I think that even the purely decorative touches in an icon possess power, that the details of it have not only metaphysical meaning but even naturalistic importance—look at the gold in the halo and in the golden highlights on Christ's garments. Don't you think this gold represents something in the actual person? I think so, and I think it was seen as something very beautiful, and it is, and it pleases us deeply to see the church decorated with many icons, especially in the beautiful light of the oil lamps and the candles."

Iconic Clothes and the Meaning of Gold

Well, to use Liebniz's language, you are right in your assertions and wrong in your negations. But let's approach the question not through what's right but what's wrong, beginning with the common question of meaning. You most certainly think of metaphysics in a concrete way, and so do I, seeing in ideas the visually manifest faces of things, the living appearances of the spiritual world, for such is the way all of us see. But when the moment arrives of actually applying these ideas to particular cases, I'm afraid that a certain cowardice overtakes us: our foot is in the air but we dare not complete the step—and we won't even consider turning back to the abstractions of metaphysics and the meaning of meaning, where validity is never visual. Nor can we look about for some intermediary step in understanding, for none exists.

A living organism is integral, and everything in it is constituted by the energy of aliveness, for if there were something dead in it—even the tiniest thing—then the organism's whole integrity would collapse. A living organism exists solely as the visual manifestation of living energy (or form-creating idea); or else it doesn't exist at all and the very word *organism* should be dropped from the dictionary. Just so, a work of art is an organism: if something in it is accidental, then that accident bears witness to the fact that the art work is not wholly incarnated, that something in it has failed to emerge into the sunlight, that something is still covered by the veil of inert earth. The concrete revelation of metaphysical essence must, in the icon, be an entirely visual revelation, and the icon's appearance (for an icon is nothing but its appearing) must—because all its details constitute a unified whole—be visual; for if something in an icon were either purely abstract or merely decorative, then it would unmake the icon's appearance as an integrated unity; and then the icon would not be an icon.

In this connection, I remember once I heard a theologian give a talk on the resurrection of the body, in the course of which he

tried to distinguish between the organs we will need in the Kingdom of God and those we won't: only the first will be resurrected while the rest (particularly the digestive system) will not be. Well, if we credit these assertions, then we must entirely discard the integral connectedness of the living body. For what kind of resurrected body are we talking about here, what will it look like after extracting all the "unnecessary" parts: a skin balloon inflated with ethereal air? For if we think of the body in purely naturalistic terms, then it has no metaphysical significance in constituting a spiritually living organism; and in the Kingdom of God, the body can have no role, neither in part nor in whole, and therefore every organ, as mere "flesh and blood," must be cut off from inheritance of the Kingdom of God. But if, on the other hand, we consider the physical body *symbolically*, then the totality of it in all its details visually manifests the spiritual energy, or idea, of the human person; and then *all* the organs of the physical body, mystically transfigured, will be resurrected as witnesses to the spirit, for just as every organ in the living body is essential to physical life, each one needing all the others in order to function rightly, so also in the order of spiritual life, everything is needful for everything else, for each thing serves to manifest the idea and, without each thing, the idea would lose in manifestation. The icon images forth the coming Kingdom of God, and it permits us to see the images (though they shimmer as in a fortune-teller's mirror) of the Kingdom that is coming. These shimmering images are wholly concrete, and to talk about some parts of them as mere accidents is to ignore the very nature of the symbolic. For if we do that, if we say this or that detail in the icon is accidental, then we must follow our theologian about the resurrection of the body.

"But are you saying that there is never anything accidental in any icon whatever?"

No, I'm not saying that at all. On the contrary, a great deal is often entirely accidental. But the accidental (in the sense of the

unintentional) can be not only *not* secondary and minor—"one hair," as you quote Plato—but precisely that which is of paramount significance: and this can happen not merely in the clothes but in the very face and even in the holy person's eyes. This happens, though, only through (as it were) the historic accident wherein an iconpainter who—in clumsiness, ignorance, and arbitrariness—dares to deviate from the iconpainting tradition and thereby brings "the philosophy of the sensuous" into spiritual symbolism. The accidental is then *in* the icon but not *of* it; it instead belongs to—or is *of*—the iconpainter. And it is clearly the case that, the more significant some part of an icon is, demanding a far greater attentiveness, the more likely it is that some distortion will enter the icon through that part, some accidental lines or some metaphysically uncertain touches of color which, in relation to the icon's spiritual essence, become like splashes of mud thrown onto a window by some passing vehicle: that is, such accidents both prevent us from seeing into the distance and block the outside light from reaching into us. And it does not matter that such distortions may enchant our gaze; they are merely muddy spots, nothing more; but it can happen that there can be so many muddy spots that an icon's spiritual essence will finally become invisible. But this is not to say that any given kind of detail—not by its execution, not by its 'development in the painting,' but in itself as such—is inherently accidental, expressing nothing spiritual.

"But what about the clothes?"

The clothes? Rozanov is the only one, I think, who somewhere says that in the Kingdom of God everyone will be naked; and then, in some kind of hostile spasm against the Church and the idea of bodily resurrection, he suddenly sees in this sacred nakedness the circumstance of being embarrassed, at which point he rejects entirely the dogma of bodily resurrection. But, as you know, the Church's teaching is precisely the opposite, and the Apostle Paul even expresses the fear that those of us who will

endure the fires of purification will not, in fact, become naked (1 Cor. 3:13). If Rozanov has reason to think that his personal clothing is inflammable, then he needs immediately to begin thinking more deeply—but that's not the reason to think his supposed 'stripping naked of the world' outrageous. For in the icons we see depicted those persons whose earthly actions will be preserved in the fires of purification, actions become only more beautifully highlighted in their last traces of earthly accident. Such persons will probably not become nude. To express this at once more figuratively and more precisely, we can call their clothes the covering woven by their acts of spiritual discipline, or *podvig;* and this is not mere figure but the exact expression of the idea that the saints, in and through ascetic *podvigs,* actually generate in their physical bodies new tissues of lightbearing organs so that their bodies may be brought continually closer to the great sphere of spiritual energies; and in terms of visual perception, this spiritual expansion of the body is symbolized by the clothes. Yes, "flesh and blood do not inherit the Kingdom of God," but the clothes do. Clothes are part of the body. In ordinary life, clothes are the body's outward expression, analogous to the fur and feathers of birds and animals; and they are added to the body semi-dynamically, and I say this because between the clothes and the body there is a relation closer than any other except human touch, for in penetrating the thin outer layers of the body's constitution, clothes become partly rooted in a living organism. In the visual order of art, clothes are the body's very appearance, for in themselves, through their surfaces and angles, they disclose the body's constitution. Clearly, then, if we can affirm that the human physical body artistically reveals the human metaphysical essence, then we must also affirm that clothes possess the same power, for the clothes are like an amplifier for the body, making louder and more direct the words the body is saying as witness to its own inner idea. A nude figure is therefore not obscene or ugly; rather, it is metaphysically less intelligible, for in it we discern with

far greater difficulty the essence of sacred humanity. But I repeat: this spiritual necessity of clothes arises not from some ordinary moralistic ground but from the spiritual essentialities of icon-painting, i.e., from the visual symbolism of the icon itself.

And in this iconographic sense, clothes provide an extraordinary insight into the spiritual style of a culture. For example, consider the folds in the garments.

With a unique exactness, the long practice of Russian icon-painting reveals the entire history of ecclesiastical spirituality by the characteristic folds in iconic garments, so that one need only glance at the folds to know when the icon was done and to understand the whole spirit of the culture reflected in it. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the archaic folds—at once naturalistic and symbolic—point to an immense but still unconscious ontology joined to sensuousness; they are sharply rectilinear folds yet still softly material, with a great many of them and showing little evidence of a strongly experienced spirituality; hence, they exhibit little overall unity, yet in their individual strength, each fold shows the power to pierce the thickness of the sensuous.

From the beginning of the fifteenth century and up to the middle of the sixteenth, the folds become longer and wider and they lose their material softness. In the first half of the fifteenth century, the folds are straight, somewhat short, and joined at angles. At first, their character is almost mineral-like, as if the person's lines and planes were crystallized matter; but then, in time, this crystalline hardness softens into something of the resilience of vegetative stems or grain stalks; and this style holds to the beginning of the sixteenth century, becoming long, widely spaced, nearly straight lines whose ends seem tightened into slight curves by the very resilience of the lines. As a result, what the iconic clothes now show is a spiritually resilient energy fulfilling a developed and coherent power.

Clearly, then, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries there is a process of growing spiritual self-consciousness (including a self-consciousness in and of Russia herself), a process wherein all of Russian life is organized to co-inhere with the spirit through the collective ascetic disciplines of the emerging nation, a process that generalizes ascetic experience into an integrated world-view. And, furthermore, the folds in this period grow intentionally straight and stylized, becoming rationally abstract yet with a strikingly attractive tendency to naturalism. If we knew nothing at all about the second half of the sixteenth century, that period we call The Time of Troubles, then—if we had the icons, or even only the *folds* in the icons—we could understand what happened in the great spiritual transformation of medieval Rus' into the Renaissance Kingdom of Moscow; for in the iconpainting of the time already is manifest that spiritual sickness of Russia called The Time of Troubles. But the healing of that sickness in the seventeenth century was merely a restoration, a temporary repair; and in the restoration, the new life of the Russian people began with the Baroque—

"Yes, of course it's essential to see the folds as connected to the icon's spiritual meaning; but you must still explain what is the *realistic* role of the iconpainting techniques. Whatever their varying characteristics, all kinds of folds can express something spiritual because they exist in the real world. But gold paint, for example, or the gold highlights or the gold-leaf on the garments: all this corresponds to nothing at all, and so it's hard to see them as anything other than purely decorative—which means they signify nothing except, possibly, the iconpainter's own personal diligence."

Oh no, on the contrary. The *assyst* you are talking about, i.e., the exacting iconpainting technique of adhering gold-leaf in wide bands or narrow strips, is one of the most conclusive proofs that iconpainting possesses a concretely metaphysical meaning. It is, I

suppose, understandable that the historical character of gold-*assyst* seems at a superficial glance to be unvaryingly monotonous; but in its essence, in its intricately refined patterns, the technique changes almost at the histological level from one style of iconpainting to another; thus, this extremely delicate golden network most expressively and conclusively manifests the icon's ontological constitution.

"But why is *gold* used? It corresponds to nothing, except maybe to the gold of jewelry. Isn't it obvious: the lustre of gold can't compare, can't correspond at all, with paint? I mean, it's no accident that nearly every visual art refuses to use gold, even in a powder form, for gold is completely alien to all paints. And, look, even the golden things in paintings are never actually painted in a gold color; and in those very rare instances where a gold color is actually used, it looks really terrible and lies on the surface like something accidently stuck onto it. All we want to do is pick it off."

What you say is completely true. But all you're really doing is clarifying—and not rejecting—this traditional technique, one absolutely necessary to the whole iconpainting tradition but not so in any other art. I would make, though, one small change in something you said: besides gold, silver was for a time also used in iconpainting, not often, but when it was, it was always exclusively used in garment folds and ornaments. However, this use of silver did not become part of iconic technique. And this fact, that silver never entered the history of iconpainting, gives us our starting point in understanding gold.

To begin with, notice that silver was used in plain opposition to the canonic traditions of iconpainting, and it is worth mentioning that one intricately detailed icon (unquestionably of aristocratic origins) used both silver and gold—and, moreover, silver highlights are put on the garments of the Mother of God in places where even gold-*assyst* never goes and, hence, in violation of *assyst's* symbolic meaning; so that the overall impression this icon

gives is one of overly conspicuous luxury, an impression arising either from the demands of the person commissioning the icon (probably as a wedding gift) or from the iconpainter himself. No instruction manual, no text on the authentification of icons, ever mentions even an exceptional use of silver; gold, however, is everywhere required. Not incidentally, silver (but not, as you rightly say, gold) is not as antagonistic to paint as is gold, for silver has an inherent correspondence with some blue-gray and especially white colors.

Furthermore, in the iconpainting from the period of its great flowering in perfection, we see only gold-leaf being permissibly used, a gold that possesses a full metallic lustre completely alien to paint. But as naturalism invaded iconpainting, the earthly style displaced the gold-leaf, and the gold was ground into a powdery matte that was far closer to paint than the leaf.

Now, you also point out that, in all the fine arts, golden objects—and, in general, anything metallic—are never depicted by either gold itself or gold color. In iconpainting equally, can one point to even a single instance where a golden object in an icon is depicted by gold-leaf or gold color—or even any metallic object by some kind of metal? One can't. And why, if gold-leaf is always permissible, can it not serve as a base color for an object that, in point of realistic fact, has metallic lustre, a base that could be then softened by gold paint?

"Well, you prove my point exactly: gold isn't used in the icon when it could actually portray something real, nor is it used (as in this case you're describing) when it could actually harmonize with paint. Therefore gold is completely meaningless, and the iconpainter's whole concern is to keep the imperceptive spectator from realizing it. So, as it turns out, it's as if the iconpainter—or, better, the whole iconpainting tradition—writes in capital letters on every icon: LET HIM WHO CAN SEE NEVER TRY TO SEE WHAT THE GOLD IS DEPICTING, FOR THE GOLD IS POINTLESS."

That's almost so; but, you know, in such matters 'almost so' is equivalent to 'not at all so.' One of iconpainting's great tasks is to establish an absolutely necessary distance between gold-leaf and paint; for, by emphasizing fully the metallic lustre of the gold, the whole of iconpainting seeks to prove—with an ultimate persuasiveness—that the gold and the paint are wholly incommensurable. The happiest icon attains this, for in its gold we can discern not the slightest dullness or darkness or materiality. The gold is pure, 'admixtureless' light, a light impossible to put on the same plane with paint—for paint, as we plainly see, reflects the light: thus, the paint and the gold, visually apprehended, belong to wholly different spheres of existence.

Gold is therefore not a color but a tone. Abstractly understood, gold is analogous (in a certain sense) to the white line in engraving but in polar opposition to it. In the engraving, the white line is, precisely and not abstractly, white and so it exists on the same plane with every other color; therefore, the white line cannot be considered the positive pole in relation to the genuinely negative pole constituted by the black line, for the former is not a true abstraction, while the latter is. The true positive pole to the black line is the gold-*assyst*, for this is pure light in direct contrast to the complete absence of light that constitutes the engraving's network of black lines. Both the *assyst* and the black line are abstractions without sensuousness, which, because completely devoid of any psychological resonances, are therefore directly related to the rational sphere. Nevertheless, despite this profound correspondence, the two are as distinct from one another as yes from no: the icon's golden stroke is the presence of reality while the engraving's black line is its absence.

"But what possible reality—that is, not what independent reality but what artistically *figurative* reality—could the *assyst* represent, since (as you have plainly just said) the gold corresponds to nothing at all."

But I did not say that the gold corresponds to nothing at all; what I was saying was that, because gold and paint have no correspondence, that which forms the boundary of gold is precisely that which corresponds to paint. Therefore to discover that which does *not* correspond to paint, it is necessary to find some artistic means other than color. If our understanding of the world is wholly naturalistic such that the content of our experience becomes solid, unbroken sensuousness, then any radical split in the means of artistic representation is at once condemned and dismissed as a flagrant lie; for if the world is solely the world we can see, then all artistic means for representing the world must be both self-consistent and conformed to the world, being wholly sensuous. Such is the case in the fine arts of the West, which exclude from their experience everything supersensuous, and which therefore not only exclude the artistic use of gold but tremble in very fear of it, as if gold would destroy the whole integrity of (say) painting's style of spirituality. Consequently, when gold is in fact used, it is badly used as a crude imitation of naturalistic metal—like, in fact, those bits and pieces of newspaper or photographs or sardine cans stuck onto the so-called artworks of recent revolutionary artists. In such cases as these, gold is plainly not at all an artistic means but is merely an empirical *thing*.

"Do you think, then, that the gold-*assyst* in the icon—like the line in engraving—is trying to reconstruct the representation in spite of the visual data; that it wants to show the vital *form* of the represented thing?"

We are not afflicted, I think, with the Kantian arrogance of Protestantism, that pride that will not accept even from God the full, flowing life of the world, rejecting it solely because it is entirely *given* to us as that which God created *for* us but not *by* us. And *why* (even if it were possible) why should we want rationally to reconstruct those dimensions of the world that, through God's blessings, we receive through our five senses, apprehending them

in and through our essential fullness? In this, we, like the Roman Catholics, do not reject the full truthfulness of colors; but we further know that, through spiritual sobriety, colors are themselves made spiritual, growing always more transparent, purer and penetrated with light such that they abandon all earthliness and approach the condition of precious gems, becoming in the end intense concentrations of planetary rays.

But there exists not only the visible world (albeit in a spiritualized mode); there is also the invisible world wherein the divine blessing, like metal melting, streams in the deified reality. This world is sensuously unapproachable and is comprehended, instead, by the intellect (using the word, of course, in the ancient and ecclesiastical senses of it). In this sense, then, one could rightly talk about the *reconstruction*, or deliberate fashioning, of spiritual reality. But there is the deepest opposition between this kind of reconstruction and what happens in Protestantism. In the icon, as in Church culture as a whole, that which is deliberately constructed is that which is sensuously unavailable, and for which we therefore need at least some schematic to assist our visual imagination. In Protestant culture, on the other hand, the invisible world is scarcely even mentioned, and, instead, it turns what is immediately available to sensory experience into abstract schemata. We fulfill the thirst to know by apprehending the whole of the visible world and then adding to this comprehension the knowledge of the invisible realm; the Protestant attempts to express *from himself* that which is already before him. Moreover, the ecclesiastical act of construction is carried out within spiritual reality, for in the iconic construction light itself (that is, the spiritual reality of nature) everywhere radiates. Gold, metal, and the sun are all colorless because they are all almost equivalent to the sun's light. That is why Vasnetsov said to me many, many times—and it is deeply true—that the sky cannot be represented by any color, that it can only be depicted in gold. Look into the sky, especially at the area around the sun, and you will see vividly

that blue is not the essential feature of sky; rather, it is a *light-bearingness*, a saturation of space by light, a depth of light that can be expressed only in gold—and which would become flat, muddy, and opaque were paint to be used to express it. And so from purest light, the iconpainter carries out his constructive work, fashioning not just anything but only the invisible realm comprehended intellectually, a realm wholly present in and as the non-sensuous content of our experience, and therefore a realm that must be represented in a way distinct from all sensuous dimensions of experience. It is precisely the same in other areas of Church thought, especially in its world-view, where dogmas concerning the invisible world are golden formulations connected to—but not mingled with—the color-formulations fashioned by science and philosophy to describe the visible world. Protestant thought, on the other hand, is like Protestant graphics in wanting to construct without using the light of true reality, using instead the absence of reality, the darkness of nothingness (one is reminded again of Cohen's work).

"Are you saying, then, that the golden strokes of *assyst* accomplish a metaphysics in highlighting what is depicted? Is the ontology of (say) clothes, or books, or footstools—that is, the ontology of everything that is—being revealed this way? I'm understanding you to say in this that, in the lines of gold-highlight (*assyst*), one sees the invisible realm somehow become comprehensible to us and, further, its primary energies become actualized into sensory images, energies whose interactions constitute the ontological skeleton of a thing. For, yes, then we can say that the *assyst*-lines are the lines of energy constituting the force-field that is the thing itself. Thus, we can also say that these lines of pressure and tension perceptible by the intellect but invisible to the sight signify a system of potentialities; for example, the highlights on garments show the lines along which the fabric would fold."

What you are saying about lines of energy and force-fields is exactly right: and it's also well known in the correct way. Consider. If an artist in depicting a magnet were to be satisfied with showing merely the visible aspect (I mean, here, visible and invisible in the common way of speaking), then he would be depicting not a magnet but merely a piece of steel; the real essence of the magnet—that is, its force-field—would go not only unrepresented but also unindicated (though undoubtedly we would simply imagine it into the representation). Furthermore, when we speak of a magnet, we *mean* the force-field along with the piece of steel—but we don't mean the opposite: a piece of steel and, secondarily, a force-field. Now, consider the other approach. If an artist were to use some physics textbook in depicting the force-field as something visually equal to the steel of the magnet, he would thereby be mingling thing and force, visible and invisible, in his representation, and in doing so he would be fashioning a visual lie about the thing as well as misrepresenting the definitive characteristics of the field (i.e., its invisibility and its activating power); hence, he would be showing two untruths about the magnet in his depiction, none of which is the magnet. Clearly, in depicting a magnet, both the field and the steel must be shown; but their depictions must also be incommensurate, showing that the magnet's two dimensions belong to two different planes. The steel could be shown in *color* while the field must be depicted *abstractly:* only so could one avoid the unanswerable question of why the field is shown in *this* color and not *that.* I dare not try to instruct the artist in how actually to represent this unmingled mingling of two planes of existence; but I am entirely certain that figurative art has the capacity to do it.

In the final analysis, depicting this unmingled mingling is the representation of the invisible dimension of the visible, the invisible understood now in the highest and ultimate meaning of the word as the divine energy that penetrates into the visible so that we can see it. This very invisible energy is also the most powerful

force, for it is the most actual force field. And just as the invisibility of God's power infinitely exceeds the invisibility of the magnetic field, so too does the ontological effectiveness of His power exceed the effectiveness of not only the magnetic field, but of every earthly force-field as well. Analogically, then, we can say this: the form of the visible is created by these invisible lines and paths of divine light.

"But I thought a while ago you were going to talk about what I said being 'not at all so,' but you have only spoken about it being 'almost so.'"

Well, that's not quite right. For you were using *force-field* in a naturalistic, almost physical sense, while I am using it merely as an image; and I am not talking about *natural* form-creating forces in reality (although these might reside in the very depth of the correspondant reality) but about *divine* forces.

"But isn't any force divine since God has created it?"

In some senses, yes; but in other senses we can properly distinguish some divine forces as belonging more directly to God than others. But there is no need here to establish this essential distinction because the very assertion of cultic significance itself presupposes the distinction; and in the absence of the assertion, the question itself cannot arise. Similarly, one can speak of either the revelation of nature or the revelation of God in nature: the latter can reveal the power of God in a more *direct* sense while the former may reveal His power in a more *specific* sense; but both are powers of God. And I want to assert that the gold-*assyst* in icons does not articulate the metaphysics of the natural order (though this order is divinely created), but that it instead corresponds directly to the manifest energy of God. Look very closely: in the icon, the *assyst* is placed not just anywhere but only upon that which has a direct relationship with the power of God, i.e., upon that reality which is itself not metaphysical even in any special

sense but which nevertheless has entered into a direct relationship with God's manifest grace.

Therefore (ignoring those rare deviations from Church tradition, spontaneous and inessential), the *assyst* was placed upon: the garments of Christ (either child or adult); the Gospel held by Christ or the saints; the throne of Christ; the thrones of the Angels in the representation of the Holy Trinity; the footsteps of Christ and the Angels of the Holy Trinity; and a few other rare instances in those ancient icons where the spiritual meanings were fully comprehended—as, for instance, the altar table. In every case, the gold clearly corresponds to the spiritual gold that is the divine light of God.

Later on, the gold is turned into a powder and takes on the characteristics of paint, and it is used in later icons to highlight the garments of saints and other things; but even so, it continues to signify heavenly grace—although a dogmatic question arises whether it is in fact in accord with the iconpainting tradition to transfer (even so gently) what is intrinsically of God to the earthly saints. Thus, the *assyst,* as the exact placement of gold, expresses the energy not of ontology in general but of God in particular, becoming the supersensuous form that penetrates the visible. Spiritually understood, gold-brocade vestments—especially the brocade woven in the traditional pattern of widely spaced golden threads—are a material image showing the flesh purified through the penetration of heavenly light into this world—

"Wait a moment, please. I'm afraid my questions have pushed our conversation in several different directions at once, and because the confusion is entirely my fault, I shall assume the unpleasant task of calling us back into some semblance of order. What we have just now been saying elucidates merely one detail of iconic technique; but it was supposed to shed light upon the entire history and practice of iconpainting as an expression of Church culture. After our illumination of Catholic painting and

Protestant engraving, it was only natural that we went on to the spirituality of certain iconic techniques (which are implicitly connected to Church cultures)—but wouldn't it be more persuasive to explore the explicit connections inside iconpainting itself? Is it possible to do this?"

Yes, of course. And as witness to the wholly unaccidental character of the traditional iconpainting techniques, let us remember that we encounter them throughout the whole of Church history and that Church art has faithfully observed and honored them from the very beginnings in earliest antiquity. In these techniques, one can clearly see the basis of a universal metaphysics and way of wisdom, a way that constitutes the humanly natural mode of seeing and comprehending the world, a way therefore opposed to the artificial modes exhibited in the techniques of Western art. Attend, for example, to the evidence from the fourth and fifth centuries; in this evidence we plainly see that the techniques of the early period are easily and absolutely identified in the techniques of all the later periods of iconpainting. St. John Chrysostom (347-407), called The Enlightener, once compared the passing of the Israelites through the Red Sea to the sacrament of Baptism, seeing the first as the *image* (τύπος) and the second as the *truth* (ἀλήθεῖα), i.e., the image of reality and the reality itself, asking: "How is it possible to think of the first as the proto-image of the second?" and then responded to his question: "You can think this when you truly learn what an image is and what truth is; then the explanation can be given."

Let us therefore ask, What are shadow and truth? When we turn to representations fashioned by great artists (it is worth noticing, in passing, that excellent iconpainters in Russia and Greece were called *sographs* or *isographs*), we notice an interesting fact: in aristocratic circumstance whenever an artist would make a darkly-colored image (in Greek, κυανόχρωος is the dark blue of the night sky), he would trace white lines (γράμμα) on the dark

ground to depict the Czar or his throne, his horse and armies, spearmen, enemies, even people tied and cast down on the ground. But though we have seen these images many times, we have not fully recognized and understood everything we are seeing; for what is being drawn *are* the man and the horse, not clearly. . . [There is a break here, of an unknown though probably brief length, in the original manuscript.]

The Ontology of Making the Icon

"Yes, I see the truth of all this; it is all very like the iconic techniques employed in the fifteenth century and later. But tell me: what do these techniques show us about the Church world-view?"

To begin with, in choosing the figurative plane, the unstable surface of the Renaissance canvas simply does not correspond to the Church's ontology, an ontology that equates the process of making the icon to the shifting appearances of circumstantial reality, an ontology that therefore does not correspond even slightly to the ephemeralities of the engraver's paper, for these ephemeralities give the illusion of easy triumph over extreme difficulty. In the fine arts, the figurative plane is brought down into the conditional; in the engraving arts, the figurative plane pretends to ascend by means of the artist's legerdemain into the realm of pure reason. Church art seeks for itself an extremely stable surface, one not merely *resembling* stability but one actually strong and unyielding; and iconic imagery therefore must possess a moment of strength comparable to this strong surface, and therefore be capable of belonging directly to Church consciousness instead of to individual consciousness in its moment of flowing into individually creative feminine receptiveness.

"Then I take it that you can see in Western art the fragmentation of iconpainting, where some elements of iconic art were one-dimensionally realized in Catholic fine arts while other elements were taken up by Protestant engraving. In regard to the

figurative plane, iconpainting probably realizes in reality all the demands of engraving in such a way that you would undoubtedly say that what an engraving hungers to be an icon perfectly is. But the surface as such—i.e., this firm, immovable surface—is really best imagined as a wall, a stone wall, for that's the perfect symbol of ontological firmness. In this sense, then, fresco-painting meets the demand; but iconpainting mostly—in fact, almost always—is not done on a wall—"

But on what, then?

"Well, clearly, on a board."

No, because the iconpainter's first task is to transform the board into a wall. Remember: the initial acts in fashioning an icon—what is called the *preparation of the board*—all together culminate in the backgrounding of the board. In this process of preparation, the carefully chosen board is first well dried, then a depression is made on the front side so that a raised margin frames the depressed surface, and then the whole board is strengthened by traverse splines on the reverse side to prevent later warping. Then the gessoing is done in seven stages. First, a nail or awl is used to scratch a screen-pattern on the front surface. Next, a hot, liquid glue is applied to the front and, after the glue dries, a piece of linen cloth (linen canvas or wide-wale hemp) is glued on using a thicker glue spread over the entire front. Then an additional layer of glue is spread on the top of the linen, and this layer is allowed to set for twenty-four hours. After the glue dries, the board is white-washed with a thoroughly mixed liquid of glue and chalk, which is then allowed to dry completely. When the white-wash is dry, the gessoing begins, and it is done in six or seven steps over three or four days. The gesso is prepared by adding in the white-wash (two-fifths of which is boiling water), a little olifa (i.e., boiled linseed oil), and chalk. The gesso is applied with a wide spatula and, after each layer, the board is allowed to dry completely. When a layer dries, it is polished with a damp pum-

ice-stone; and this is done several times, after each layer of gesso has thoroughly dried. And then it is dry-polished with the pumice-stone. The final polishing of the gesso is with the horsetail plant or (in our practices now) with extremely fine sandpaper. Now, and only now, is the figurative surface ready. Clearly, this surface is nothing other than a wall—more accurately, a wall-niche—for the icon-board condenses all the accumulated properties of a wall: its surface whiteness, its structural fineness and solidity, are the very essence of a wall; and it therefore permits that noblest form of fine art, wall-painting. Historically, iconpainting arose from the technique of wall-painting and is its essential aliveness released from the strictures of external dependence upon the accidents of architecture.

"In wall-painting, a stylus, or other sharp instrument, is used to trace or score the drawing onto the wall—which you would interpret, I suppose, as an engraver's act. And it is indeed engraving; but is there anything that corresponds to it in this metaphysical concentration of wall-painting called iconpainting?"

Yes, there is, for the work on the figurative surface begins with such an act of engraving. The iconic engraver first draws in charcoal or pencil onto the gessoed surface the *pattern* of the iconic image (i.e., the pattern recognized as sacred by the Church), and then he cuts the pattern in with a stylus, i.e., a needle-sharp instrument with a wooden handle, called a *graphia.* The Greek verb γράφω means "to cut, scratch, engrave" as well as "to write," and a γράφη is an engraver's knife. The *graphia* is a very ancient instrument whose origin is buried deep in the centuries; in one form or another, it is the primary instrument of figurative art. For iconic engravers, to use this instrument for tracing the pattern is an act of awesome responsibility, especially in cutting the folds of the garments, because such engraving is the act of translating the things of the other world into evidence sensorily present to thousands of believers praying, evidence held

sacred by the Holy Church, and even the tiniest, most minute alteration in this sensory evidence will give it an entirely different style and whole other spiritual structure. Even at this initial stage, then, the engraver feels responsible to the integral wholeness of the iconic tradition, i.e., to the truth of its ontological evidence even in its simplest first formulations. This act of engraving is pure abstraction, eventually almost invisible, yet it, too, partakes of the sensory order. Therefore the engraving must attain fullness of clarity in order to be visual; and when the iconic engraver completes his task and passes on the work to the hands of the other different masters—

"But this seems so *mechanical* in its execution, so like mass production. For I doubt very much that the essence of an icon—as a work of art—can have anything corresponding to this passing from one pair of hands to another."

You're raising a very significant question here, and I want to speak directly to your doubt. To begin with, an icon is not an art-work, a self-enclosed piece of art; rather, the icon is a work of witness that employs art as well as many other things. What you contemptuously call "mass production" is therefore essential to iconpainting, for its sensory evidence must enter into every home and every family, becoming in the authentic sense popular in its proclaiming of the highest spiritual reality concentrated within ordinary everyday life. One possibility in iconpainting technique, then, is rapid execution—a possibility that can cause very fine icons to appear in ways that permit (as with the Stroganovs of our era) the vanity of wealthy accumulation, whereby sacred things can become mere objects in a vast art collection.

But about the specializations in iconpainting: they arise not simply through external causes, for even a 'first-appeared' icon is never conceived as an act of solitary creativity; rather, every icon belongs in essence to the collective work of the Church; and even if, by chance, a particular icon is fashioned entirely by one single

master, some ideal participation of other iconpainters is always implied. Just so, every Divine Liturgy is always served by more than a single priest serving alone; and if by chance it is singly served, then there is still everywhere implied in that Liturgy the participation of the bishop and other priests, deacons and all the orders of the clergy. In secular fine arts, an artist sometimes gives part of his work into the hands of another, but the work nevertheless everywhere implies individual creativity; in iconpainting, on the other hand, the iconpainter may sometimes work alone, but the collectivity of work is necessarily implicit in the icon. In fine arts, an artist's stylistic uniqueness demands the absence of other people; in iconpainting, the primary goal is always the clarity of a collectively carried and transmitted truth; hence, if by chance some purely subjective view of things spontaneously creeps into one moment of the iconpainting process, it will be balanced in the final icon by other masters mutually correcting one another.

And so the engraver finishes his work and the colorists begin theirs: and this permits the colorists to develop within themselves a special attentiveness wherein they never disturb that dimension of iconpainting which must adhere most exactly to sacred Tradition. But the colorists are separated into those who paint the faces, hands and uncovered areas of the body and those who paint the covered figures and backgrounds. This profoundly meaningful division corresponds to the principles of inward and outward, of "I" and "not-I," whereby the face expresses inward life while everything not the face serves to manifest the whole world created for humanity. In iconpainting terms, the face is termed the *countenance* (*lik*), while everything else—body, garments, rooms, buildings, trees, rocks, and so on—is background, or prior steps, to painting the face. Painting the face is called *lichnoe* while painting everything else is termed *dolichnoe;* and by *lik* is understood those secondary organs of expressiveness (i.e., the "little countenances") of hands and feet. In this division of the icon's whole content into the processes of *lichnoe* and *dolichnoe* we

plainly see the Greek patristic understanding of existence being divided into *man* and *nature;* a division wherein each is at once distinct and inseparable from the other; hence, it is a division expressing the primordial paradisical harmony of inwardness and outwardness. On the other hand, when sin rended the creation asunder, man and nature became opposed to one another, an opposition concluding itself precisely in the fine-arts division between landscape and portraiture; for in landscape, man is at first suppressed, then made into an accessory, and finally wholly excluded from the landscape, while in portraiture everything surrounds man and thereby ceases to have its own unique countenance (*lik*), becoming merely an environmental atmosphere; and finally the body disappears from the portrait, leaving only a face now alienated from the whole created world—and the portrait's real goal now is merely the face's expression. Thus, when we consider the processes of *lichnoe* and *dolichnoe,* we must see not only an external arrangement of productive methods but also the possibilities of a polyphonic expressiveness. Similarly —though I won't explore them now—the person who applies the background, the one who applies the facial colors, the one who puts on the olifa finish, the person who does the gilding: all these specializations possess their own inner sense.

"But, plainly, the primary division is between the engraver and the painter. But tell me, who paints the background for the figures in the icon?"

To ask the question in iconpainting terms is to ask who does the *light.* I call your attention to this remarkable sentence: *the icon is executed upon light*—a sentence perfectly expressing the whole ontology of iconpainting. When it corresponds most closely to iconic tradition, light shines golden, i.e., it is *pure* light and not color. In other words, every iconic image appears always in a sea of golden grace, ceaselessly awash in the waves of divine light. In the heart of this light "we live, and move, and have our being"; it

is the space of true reality. Thus, we can comprehend why golden light is the icon's true measure: any color would drag the icon to earth and weaken its whole vision. And just the same way that the creative grace of God is both cause and condition of all earth's creation, just so in the icon: after the abstract pattern is sketched, the process of incarnating the icon begins with the gold-leafing of light. Further, in the same way that the icon begins with the gold of creative grace, it ends in the highlighting with the gold of illumination, *assyst.* In this visual ontology, the painting of the icon repeats the main stages of God's creation from absolute nothingness to the holy creation.

"I was thinking the very same thing as you spoke. But, you know, I have another thought: it seems as if the ontologies of the Church and of Plato are so extraordinarily intertwined in the iconpainting process (and both to the ontology of ancient art) that this very intertwining must itself be explained. For I know that Platonism is primarily a religious practice, that its essential terminology is the language of mystery, that its essential images possess a consecrative nature, and that Plato's Academy is somehow related to the Eleusinian Mysteries and is thought to be the primary ontological architect of ancient idealism wherein the patterns of the heavens were transmitted into the divine works of earthly artists. My question is this: isn't it possible that ontology itself is merely a theoretical formulation of iconpainting?"

Well, if you want to talk about the deepest inner affinities between them, then, yes, it is as you say. But, you know, I am essentially opposed to the conceptual unification of different activities, for if the differences were merely appearances, then they would not exist in reality, and so they would have sprung not from each other but from some common root. I firmly believe that both the canonic colors of iconpainting and the theoretical formulations of iconographic ideas reveal the same spiritual essence, that in fact the colors are the visual images of the ideas; at the very

least, there is a great parallelism. For when, on some hypothetical icon, there appears that first concreteness (i.e., first according to spiritual rank and historical emergence) which is the golden light, then the white silhouettes receive the first level of concreteness and actualize what until then had been only the abstract possibility of existence, a possibility that was not, in the Aristotelean sense, a potentiality but, rather, a merely logical schematon and therefore precisely a *non-existent* (τὸ μὴ εἶναι).

Western rationalism believes that it can create something—indeed, everything—from this non-existence. But the ontology of the East believes otherwise, saying that *ex nihilo nihil* and that something—again, everything—is created only by the Real One, by the Creator. In the iconpainting process, the golden color of superqualitative existence first *surrounds* the areas that will become the figures, manifesting them as possibilities to be transfigured so that the abstract non-existents become concrete non-existents; i.e., through the gold, the figures become potentialities. These potentialities are no longer abstract, but they do not yet have distinct qualities, although each of them is a possibility of not any but of some concrete quality. Τὸ οὔχ ὄν (the non-existent) has become τὸ μὴ ὄν (the potential). Technically speaking, the operation is one of filling in with color the spaces defined by the golden contours so that the abstract white silhouette becomes the concrete colorful silhouette of the figure—more precisely, it *begins* to become the concrete colorful silhouette of the figure. For at this point, the space does not yet possess true color; rather, it is only not a darkness, not wholly a darkness, having now the first gleam of light, the first shimmer of existence out from the dark nothingness. This is the first manifestation of the quality, color, a little bit illumined by light. In the operations of *dolichnoe,* this dark color—which, at every stage, bears the tonality of the next layer of paint—is known in Russian as *raskrishka,* which means both "opening" and "coloring." The *dolichnoe* painter "opens" the garments and other solid areas of the icon by floating the colors on.

This *floating* of colors is a highly significant detail of the icon-painting process, for it shows that both the painterly brushstroke and the glazing technique are impossible in iconpainting, for here, in the icon, there are no half-tones or shadows: instead, reality is revealed by the degrees of the manifestation of existence—but not by putting one piece or quality alongside another. Here, then, is the deepest technical opposition between the icon and the oil painting, for in the oil, the image always is executed by parts and never whole.

The coloring is followed by the execution of the folds. The folds and other details are darkened by using the color of the same tone but lightened to a greater intensity so that the lines within the contours now move from the abstract to the concrete: the creative word manifests the abstract possibility. Next in the *dolichnoe* is the first highlighting of the leading edges of the lighted surfaces. The highlights are applied in three stages, each one mixed with more white and applied in narrower areas than the preceding. The third, the narrowest and brightest, is termed *ojivka,* which in Russian means both "highlight" and "enlivener." (Some iconpainting terminologies call the first two applications "execution" and only the third "highlight.") The final phase of the *dolichnoe* process is the extremely fine execution of the gold-*assyst* technique using, in the early history of iconpainting, a special glue made from thickened beer but, in later iconpainting, employing a liquid gold technique called 'feather-like' execution. In exactly the same manner are executed the highlights on chambers, mountains, clouds, and trees: two or three applications of *ojivka;* the colors are applied in a floating technique where the paint is more watery than that used in the garments—as opposed to painting the faces, where the color is thicker than that used on the garments. Thus, the garments establish a link between the inner world of the face and the outer natural world, becoming an intermediate reality between the two other realities, an intermedi-

ate existence between the two poles of creation, humanity and nature.

"But in describing the process of iconpainting, you have left out the main thing: *lichnoe,* the painting of the faces. This is, in general, where painting really begins."

Yes, painting begins there. But iconpainting finishes with it. But before we try to reach any real clarity, let's recall the primary stages of the *lichnoe* process. The stages have essentially the same sequence as in *dolichnoe.* The first stage of *lichnoe* corresponds to the first application of color in the icon, and it is termed *sankiring,* from the word "sankir," which is the primer paint used for the face. The act of sankiring determines in significant measure the icon's main character and whole style. Sankir does not have a definitive color; instead, it is the potentiality for the face's future color; and because the human face possesses infinite color and is therefore subject to infinite interpretations, the sankir has over the ages of iconpainting differed in composition and tone. Byzantine sankir was grey-blue with an indigo tone; the Italo-Crete sankir was brown; while in Russia, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was at first green and then darkened toward brown; and by the later sixteenth century, it had become dark tobacco brown; and so on. Equally as the tone changed, so did the composition of the sankir change: in the time of the second period of the Stroganov school, sankir was composed from umber with some white and ochre added; later, according to Pancelios, sankir had to be composed of equal parts of white, ochre, green (used for frescos), and one-quarter part of black; and contemporary sankir uses burnt umber, light ochre, a tiny quantity of Holland soot; and so on, with varying compositions. The sankired face initially is, we may say, the face's concrete non-existence. When the sankir dries, the iconpainter executing *lichnoe* retraces in lines of color every contour in the face, both inner and outer, in a process called *opis,* meaning "outlining" or "re-drawing"; as a

result, the face acquires its first determination, moving from concrete non-existence into the first stage of visuality. The colors used in this re-drawing vary according to the iconic style. Just as with the coloring in *dolichnoe,* the more vivid the colors used in *opis,* the less the icon expresses the graphic linearity of engraving—and the more it pulls away from rationalism.

In the fourteenth century, the *opis* was done only on part of the face and then in bright red to contrast with the green of the sankir. Then the *opis* grew darker, becoming more coherent and more brown, but the lines were still soft in the style of fine art painting; later, corresponding to the rationalism of the fifteenthth century, the *opis* became stronger, sharper and blacker, rather like the lines of a pen, increasingly resembling engraving lines. Then, in the seventeenth century (but earlier in Greece), there appeared in the *opis* a series of white strokes following the contours and resembling the shadows in an engraving. It should also be said here that the lines defining the eyes, eyebrows, hair and (in male faces) beard are all redrawn in a darker sankiresque color. Then the execution of the face is done in a process corresponding to the highlighting in *dolichnoe.* The points where light happens in *lichnoe* are the forehead, cheeks, and nose, all of which are covered with a watery paint composed of ochre or (in Russian) *vochra,* whence the Russian iconpainting tradition derives its word to describe the executing of the face in ochre: *vochreniye.* The *vochreniye* color varies according to the period and style of the icon: in the fourteenth century, *vochreniye* used a warm pink; in the fifteenth century, it became brownish orange while, in the sixteenth, it was brownish yellow; the seventeenth century deliberately archaized the *vochreniye* by again using a warm pink; and the eighteenth century began to employ white, probably imitating powder. Thus, the other names for *vochreniye*—ones that do not bind the process to a particular color—are undoubtedly more correct, even though these names have not become part of traditional iconic terms: and especially right is the term *incarnation*

taken from French and English. Now, the first application of the ochre highlighting is diluted at the edges with a liquid solution of color between the ochre and the sankir. This dilution serves to soften the disjunction between sankir and ochre; and at these same disjunctive edges there is also applied a mummy color mixed with either ochre or cinnabar to indicate rosiness in the cheeks and other parts of the face. Then a second layer of ochre is floated, lighter than the first and covering all of it, including the rosiness as well as part of the diluted edges. Then a third layer is applied in the very lightest places, and sometimes this third layer is called (as in *dolichnoe*) *ojivka*, meaning both "highlight" and "enlivener." Finally, the features of the face are redrawn as well as the hair; and the places of greatest significance (in terms either of facial structure or spiritual illumination) are done in pure white either as short, thick lines or as long, narrow stripes: the former are called "motions" and the latter "marks," and sometimes together they are termed "incisions."

In some much later icons, the edges between sankir and ochre were further softened by a thin, white hatch-pattern. But iconpainting traditions have mostly eschewed the technique as antithetical to the spirit of iconpainting, believing that its necessity in the icons employing it arises solely from the iconpainter's inability to float color with the requisite skill.

"Does this complete, then, the making of the icon?"

Yes, it does—except for the soul of the icon, the written inscription. But this is not the icon's full completion, for now the whole icon is covered with olifa: with, that is, vegetable oil boiled—as well as applied—by methods that bear in the art a great responsibility (and that therefore are closely kept professional secrets). Whatever way it is made and applied, the olifa has an enormous impact. And, by the way, contemporary icon-restorers make a great mistake in seeing the olifa merely as a technical means for preserving the colors; in reality, it is an artistic force that

draws all the colors into a common tonality while simultaneously giving them great depth. I am certain, too, that the olifa and its various applications serve to distinguish styles of iconpainting. I remember especially the many times I saw how the high significance of an old icon's artistry was entirely destroyed by removing the golden warmth of the ancient olifa and replacing it with a new, colorless olifa. The old icon would look merely like a background for some later work.

"It's no doubt the case, too, that the metalwork in an icon—that is, the *riza* or the elaborately worked metallic frame around the icon—is also part of the icon's artistic wholeness—isn't that the case?"

In certain cases, yes, particularly in modern instances where the iconpainter himself has considered the matter—in these cases, it's not merely an artistically irrelevant expression of a patron's luxury; even a *riza*'s precious inlay-stones can clearly be integrated into the icon's wholeness. But most of the time the *riza* and other such things have been merely external ornamentation. Gold and precious stones possess an artistic symbolism too overwhelming to be useful to most iconpainters—

"You know, we've taken the icon up through its final stages and we've discussed all the essential meanings of the acts, but—"

Have we left something out?

"Well, look at this and tell me: one of the most important things of all in the teaching of fine arts is *shadows*: both theory and practice give perhaps their greatest attention to precisely this, to the skills and means of creating *shadows*; for the artists plainly believe that the way they create *shadows* determines their whole artistic style. So, naturally, I'm a bit bewildered: how have we gotten all this way in iconography and not once even mentioned the word *shadow*?"

We haven't forgotten it; it's simply that, in iconpainting, shadows have no place. The iconpainter never enters into an affair with darkness and so he never creates shadows in the icon.

"But why not? All iconic images stand in some kind of relation to things in the real world, and so why doesn't the iconpainter as he depicts these real things also depict their shadows?"

Because an iconpainter depicts the *being* of a real thing, even the essential *goodness* of the being: a shadow, on the other hand, is not being but the absence of being. Thus, to depict a shadow would be to characterize an absence by something positive, by a presence—and that would be a radical distortion of ontology. If the world is what the Creator creates, and if artistic creation manifests the divine image in humankind, then its entirely natural to expect parallelism between creativity in essence and creativity in likeness. It's also entirely natural to expect that the different phases of the art that is more universally human and sacred—that these phases would repeat the primary stages of the metaphysical ontogenesis of things and beings. And in terms of psycho-physiology, it would be strange indeed to depict 'something' not only that one cannot see even partially or weakly but that also is in fact the *whole absence* of something.

"But you can't deny that, in the fine arts, shadows *are* depicted, especially in watercolor where (and this is quite clear) paint is *not* applied to places of light and *is* to the areas of shadow. I think this technique is inevitable because an artist, metaphysically, moves from light into shadow, from illumination into darkness. The metaphysical opposite is plainly wrong; for in ontology as in cognitive perception, *omnis determinatio est negato:* that is, for a thing to have individuality of form (*determinatio*), something must be taken away (*negato*) from its fullness. Cognition is therefore analysis; it deconstructs so as to emphasize; and so we cognize a thing by cutting out its perceptible boundaries from the surrounding space it inhabits. The artist, I think, does something

very like this; and, in doing so, he adheres quite closely to the underlying methodological philosophy—"

Of the Renaissance; and in this, I quite agree with you. But you're ignoring the fact that there exists an absolutely opposite philosophy and that, as a result, there exists an art corresponding to it. Really, you know, if iconpainting did not exist, *il faudrait l'inventer,* one would have to invent it. But it does exist and it is as ancient as humanity itself. The iconpainter moves from shadow into light, from darkness into illumination. And our entire discussion of iconic techniques arose from this essential characteristic: an abstract schema and, surrounding it, the light that defines the silhouette (which is potentially the image and its color), and then the consequent revelation of the image, its configuration and reconfiguration as the image is shaped through the process of highlighting; next, the layers of paint, each lighter than the last and ending in special highlights, create the final image in the darkness of nonbeing—and so this image arises from light. An artist in oils seeks to understand the thing he paints as something real in itself, apart from and opposite to the light; and through his wrestling with the light (i.e., his painting of shadows) he seeks to assert the reality primarily of himself. Thus, in the fine-arts' understanding, light is merely the empirical occasion wherein a thing manifests itself. For the iconpaianter, on the other hand, light has no empirical reality and so it cannot be an empirical occasion.

For something to become uniquely individual, nothing need be negated—nor is there anything to negate, for until a thing is formed by light, it has no existence whatever; for a thing comes to possess concreteness not by negation but the positive act of creation: that is, by the quick play of light. At first, there was void; then, through an act of creation, nothingness appeared—that is, positive nothingness, the embryo, the beginning of a thing; then, as it is penetrated by light, the nothingness begins to assume shape, and it continues to do so until that which determines the

form more essentially is more illumined, while the less significant is illumined less. But: precisely upon that which the light comes to rest, there—in the measure of its illumination—is that which enters existence. Concreteness, individuation, and existence are positive. The divine Yes to the world is the incarnate, creative Word, because the voice of God we see as light, while the heavenly harmony is planetary movement. It is not without reason that poets can hear sounds in light, for although in the silent speech of God, in His faint whispering, one may see less of light, it nevertheless remains fully light and never darkness: full darkness is absolutely imperceptible because it has no being and is empty abstraction. And it is not without reason that one famous contemporary engraver depicts both deep shadows and invisible worlds not by depiction but by translation: that is, by the abstract whiteness of the empty paper. At the conclusion of everything, it all comes to this: either we believe in this world's ontological primacy and self-sufficiency, a world that self-generates and self-destructs; or else we believe and acknowledge that this world is the direct creation of God. The art of Renaissance painting has always (if sometimes inconsistently) served the first world-view; iconpainting has always chosen the second. From this ontological difference arises all their technical differences.

"It follows from all this that one should want to re-examine how light acts in Western art-works, because there *is* light in them, even quick strokes of light very like the *ojivki.*"

Yes, this is an essential question. But to answer it rightly, it is essential to remember very clearly that Western art (as opposed to iconpainting) has never from any angle—not even in its most classicistic moment—exhibited coherence. Iconpainting is a purely coherent art, one wherein everything connects to everything: substance and surface; drawing style and subject matter; the meaning of the whole and the way we comprehend that meaning—everywhere in the icon a coherence exists that corresponds to the rich organic wholeness of Church culture. The whole culture of the Renaissance, on the other hand, is in its deepest essence eclectic and contradictory; it is an analytically fractional culture composed of contradictory elements each of which ceaselessly strives for complete independence. What is true of Renaissance culture is true of the art: it lives in—even as it negates—the theocratic integrity of its own life, for it lives in the nourishment it draws from its medieval roots; and if it were ever to uproot itself from these conditions of nourishment, it would arrive at self-destruction.

For example, consider this very simple thing: how much of Renaissance art would be left if it excluded all religious subject-matter, if it moved entirely away from all ecclesiastical promptings? I don't want to engage this question here in any great length; instead, I merely want to point out that Renaissance art for the most part views light as an external, physical energy. By contrast, the Church understands light as an ontological force that mystically creates what exists.

"You're saying, then, that in Western art all objects exist solely in themselves and that light exists solely in itself and that any correlations between them are merely accidental; i.e., that any given object is merely lit by the light and, therefore, that the bright strokes of light could be put anywhere. These strokes may be accidental in relation to one another, but their mutual relations are never accidental, for it is these that determine that object of objects, the light source.

By the unity of perspective, the artist seeks to express the spectator's uniqueness as perceiving subject; but by the unity of chiaroscuro, he seeks to express the objectivity of the light-source. I clearly see this as the positivistic, equalizing task of Renaissance art: to *de-exist* the hierarchy of existence and to equate both the illuminative light and the contemplative spirit with the external

objects, putting everything on the plane of the conditional. But how, in the end, can we think the inverse of all this?"

To begin with, Western art itself swerves from its own great task, exceeding its own tutelary spirit. Thus, though the art everywhere proclaims the techniques of perspective, in its supreme masterpieces it deliberately abandons the norms of perspective; and equally it abandons the unity of light. If Western art recognized light as solely accidental and arbitrary, then it would think light as something entirely non-ontological, and an illumined object would be merely a form that is lighted and not something light-formed—and that is how we would understand what the artist means in proclaiming the relations of light and object as purely spontaneous ones. But, in actual fact, the Western artist deliberately *chooses* the lighting, for he plainly considers that it is not just any light but only *this* light which will rightly shape the forms he is painting. One light will reveal while another will distort the truth of forms, and thus, by a secret attentiveness, the artist discovers that not only the object's visual appearance but also its true form is being given him by the activities of light—and it can be either well or poorly given. But think: what does "well given" mean here except (half-consciously) "ontologically given?" And therefore an artist of sufficient depth will deliberately break the unities of chiaroscuro so as to shape his forms truly and essentially.

"It appears, then, that the shaping of forms becomes an activity of light."

More: the shaping is *from* acts of light. This metaphysics of the Church was more or less intuited by some Renaissance artists; but others, who did not care at all about adhering to strict Renaissance techniques, openly pursued this way of light-shaping and thereby entirely abandoned the unities of chiaroscuro. What is Rembrandt's high relief (*alto relievo*) if not the materiality of light? Even to raise in Rembrandt the issues of strict chiaroscuro and

perspective is plainly absurd. Rembrandtian space is closed and the light-source is banished, all material things becoming unravelings from an inner core of substantial luminescence.

"Is this also true of the icon, that it also strives for this inner luminescence, like fox-fire from decaying wood?"

Of course not, for the Renaissance culture of self-deification in the world especially condemns a Rembrandt, for he stands in relation to the sober Dutch the same way Jacob Boehm stands in relation to Kirhgoff and Hertz.

Iconpainting depicts objects as forms created by light rather than as things lit by a light-source—but in Rembrandt there is not any light (the objective cause of things), nor are things created by light; instead, there is a primordial light, which is the self-luminescence of primordial darkness; and this primordial light is Boehm's Abgrund. This primordial light is, of course, pantheism—which is the polarity created by Renaissance atheism.

"But it is remarkable how (in contrast to Italian rationalistic light—a partial exception to which, I suppose, would be Leonardo's magicalisms)—it is remarkable how the North has this general tendency to pantheistic phosphoresence.

The definitive characteristic is the self-deification of the world joined to a rejection of asceticism, proclaiming that the disciplines of holiness are not needed for earthly illumination; thus, for the German mystics, the height and value of what is mystically apprehended is entirely unrelated to the height and value of the spiritual disciplines that refine the physical body. Reubens is a shining instance of the self-luminescence of large, heavy flesh. I am sure you will agree about Reubens, but I think you haven't sufficiently attended to the deep affinity that Rembrandt and Reubens have with the spiritual basis of the whole Dutch school, for the mysterious Rembrandt has countless relatives among the Dutch still-life artists.

And so I found it strange to hear you talk about sober Dutch burghers—for all these extremely beautiful grapes and peaches and apples, all these succulent vegetables and fish: if these are merely naturalistic, what would we ever call metaphysical? But in Dutch still-life, of course, we are seeing the *idea* of grapes, the *idea* of apples, and so on. And all of it, like in Rembrandt, is luminescence from within—"

I don't deny this moment of self-luminescence in Dutch still-life painting, but—in opposition to Rembrandt—these fruits and vegetables everywhere exhibit partly what I call a *righteous* connection to the earth: for in them there is something of iconpainting, something of things being created by light. But in the Dutch still-life, the unities of chiaroscuro and the external relation of form to light are entirely absent; and our question, as you remember, concerns the dominant *tendency* of Western art to which tendency (and not to art itself) we are opposing the tendency of iconpainting or its tendency (in this case, it makes no difference).

Iconpainting considers light not as something external to objects; neither does it consider light as belonging to some primordial substance: for iconic light establishes and builds things, becoming the objective cause of their existence; and, precisely because it cannot be conceived as external, iconic light is the transcendental origin of things, a creative origin that manifests itself through things but does not terminate in them.

"Yes, you are quite right, the techniques and materials of iconpainting are such that the images they depict can only be comprehended as being generated by light; consequently, the spiritual ground of every iconic image is that one wholly light-bearing and transcendentally brilliant Face. But I wonder: is this Face only an inevitable impression, merely some kind of metaphysical illusion arising from the iconpainting techniques—some entirely unintended consequence of the artistic process—or is it a

genuine metaphysics that is being consciously and deliberately expressed through iconpainting?"

Are you certain that you are stating the dilemna correctly? You ask whether the metaphysics of the icon are something illusory and therefore not worth discussing philosophically, as if the metaphysics had no rational content, or as if they were some abstract theory that had to be carefully applied to the icon, thereby making the icon into something allegorical. The whole question puts us at a fork in a road where, no matter which way we take, we end up in the same place.

"And what place is that?"

The place where the icon is rejected as a visual image of the other world. For if we say that the metaphysics of iconpainting are *either* accidental illusion *or* deliberate intention, we arrive at the same conclusion: the actual icon is soulless. That is, either way the actual icon itself becomes mute, empirical, and external, while its vital spirituality becomes something abstract and wholly apart from its visual actuality. If the metaphysics are illusion, then the spirituality follows behind the visual actuality; if they are intentional, then the icon's spirituality runs ahead of the visual. The fact of the matter is that the true sense of the icon is precisely in its visual rationality, or its rational visuality, that is, in its incarnation. I don't know whether you see how your question leads us into the denial of the icon; but I clearly see that it does; and so, rather than denying the icon, I prefer to deny your question.

"But I had no idea that such catastrophe attended my question; and I still cannot see where the grave danger lies."

Well, consider: what is this tacitly assumed notion we have silently introduced about abstract metaphysics, about metaphysics as abstract thought? The whole assumption is radically rejected by religious thought; more precisely, abstract constructions *per se* are not recognized by the Church. The Church flatly denies the spiritual meaning of any idea that is not grounded in concrete

experience, for She ceaselessly affirms the metaphysicality of life and the aliveness of metaphysics. When the Church talks about the purely metaphysical content of this or that visual appearance, She understands that, in a coherent parallelism, She is speaking of *two* revelations of the same concrete experience. You, however, were talking about metaphysics on the one hand and, on the other hand, iconpainting; but in the concrete experience of the icon, the fulcrum for both iconpainting and metaphysics is neither an abstract idea about the nature of things nor the sensory qualities of the empirical colors but, rather, the spiritual experience—

"But wait: do you talk about a *vision* of a saint?"

Yes, certainly I do. But to avoid ambiguity in this, let us try to use a word that will bring together vision and illusion, and so let us speak of a saint's *appearance.* Both metaphysics and iconpainting are grounded on the same rational fact (or factual rationality) concerning a spiritual appearance: which is that, in anything sensuously *given,* the senses wholly penetrate it in such a way that the thing has nothing abstract in it but is entirely incarnated sense and comprehended visuality. A Christian metaphysician will therefore never lose concreteness and so, for him, an icon is always sensuously *given;* equally, the iconpainter can never employ a visual technique that has no metaphysical sensuousness. But the fact that the Christian philosopher consciously compares iconpainting and ontology does not lead the iconpainter to use the philosopher's terms; rather, the iconpainter expresses Christian ontology not through a study of its teachings but by philosophizing with his brush. It is no accident that the supreme masters of iconpainting were, in the ancient texts, called *philosophers;* for, although they did not write a single abstract word, these masters (illumined by divine vision) testified to the incarnate Word with their hands and fingers, philosophizing truly through their colors. This is the only way to understand what the patristic texts ceaselessly repeat and what the ecumenical councils repeatedly assert: what the words of the sermon are for the ear, so the icons are for the eye. And this is so not because the icon conditionally 'translates' some written text or other but, instead, because both icon and text have as their immediate subject—a subject from which neither seeks to be separated and to the manifesting of which both essentially seek—: both have as their subject the same spiritual reality. And according to all of the ancient world, what manifests concretely the spiritual realm is philosophy. Thus, all true theologians and all true iconpainters were equally called *philosophers.*

"And so you would say that iconpainting *is* metaphysics, just as metaphysics is in a certain sense verbal iconpainting."

Yes, and for this reason: we can discern in the work of both an unceasing parallelism—even though the parallelism isn't consciously (better: isn't *intentionally*) active. For example, consider the style of those verbally baroque theologians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for in their writings and sermons we can plainly see a deliberately spiralling tangle of verbal folds moving in a complex and elegant ceremonious dance: a perfect verbal mimesis of the Baroque icon; and in this inner correspondence in subject and style between theology and iconpainting is a matter awaiting scholarly examination. But my point here is the far more important issue concerning the metaphysics of light, for this is the primary characteristic of all iconpainting.

"I know that, in ancient philosophic culture long before Christ, the highest and most supremely valued senses were sight and hearing. Thus, when, for example, Heraclitus said, "The eyes and the ears are not reliable witnesses," he was saying that *even* the eyes and ears are wholly and merely sensuous. I also know that (at least in classical Greek thought) sight is more valued than hearing. In fact, the definitive characteristic of Greek thought is precisely the sense of sight, and, in Platonism, the spiritual essence of a thing is its *appearance* (εἶδος) rather than its sound or smell or taste or touch. Moreover, in ancient philosophy, the highest state

of knowing the metaphysical ground of all existence was expressed always as inner illumination, as inward light. All Platonic ontology, of course, is elaborated in visual schemata, because all reality (Plato said) is a blend of, or juncture between, darkness (non-existence)and appearances or ideas (existence); and the metaphysical ground of these latter is the sun of the ideational world, which Plato called the idea of the Good—that is, *the source of light.* No one who studies Plato can fail to see the concrete clarity of Plato's *ideational light*—and see also that this concrete clarity, far from accidental, is based on Plato's mystical experience. There is much to say on this, but I was coming to this question: do you see Church teaching, in the general connecting to Platonic tradition, within this framework of understanding?"

The Metaphysics of Light and St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians

Yes, I do, and the definitive point is the word light itself. There are at least a hundred compound words in Church language composed of this word: light-bearer, light-giver, light-like, light-of-light, light-manifesting, and on and on, not even counting the vast instances of the single word *light.* Some time ago, literary criticism discovered that a work of literature is dominated by this or that character, image or word; that the work is, in fact, created for that image or word; that that image is the *embryo* of the work itself—

"And the embryonic word in all Church writings—and especially in the liturgical services—is of course *light.* This dominant tonality of light in the services cannot be denied. But can you talk more concretely and (if possible) more concisely about this metaphysic of light?"

No one is more concise about this than the Apostle.

"What do you mean?"

Πᾶν γὰρ τὸ φανερούμενον φῶς ἐστιν: "whatsoever doth make manifest is light" (Eph 5:14). That is, everything that

appears, the full content of every experience, every existing thing, is *light.* Thus, anything that is not light cannot appear, for it is not a reality. Every darkness is unfruitful, and so the Apostle calls the "works of darkness" precisely "unfruitful" (Eph 5:11). This unreality is the pitch darkness located outside God. In God is all existing, all fullness of reality; outside Him stretches the nothingness of Hell's darkness. By the way, in Greek the word *Hell* or *Hades* (ἄδης, ἄιδης) means *without view, viewless,* i.e., that which is deprived of "view" or appearance. Reality is appearance, idea, countenance (*lik*); unreality is appearancelessness, Hell, darkness.

Every existing thing also possesses the active energy by which it manifests its reality; thus, something unable to act so is unreal—"only nonexistence lacks energy," the Fathers would say. And so darkness, being fruitless, as the Apostle says, therefore lacks energy; it is (in the unique sense of the word) nonbeing and death. But suddenly a light will shine in it and awaken in it "children of light" who bear fruit "in all goodness and righteousness and truth, proving what is acceptable unto the Lord" (Eph 5:9-10). Thus, the fruit borne by the acts of light is the "proving" or searching (δοκιμάζοντες) the will of God, that is, searching the ontological ground of existing. This searching is the manifesting of every existing thing, that is, the comprehension of the incommensurability between the earthly realm and its spiritual idea in the divine Countenance; but this manifesting occurs (as the Apostle says) *by light.*

"The general idea that 'whatsoever doth make manifest is light' is undoubtedly correct in Church teaching. But can we, keeping to the literal sense of these words to the Ephesians, explain their ontological and iconic senses? I think it's entirely impossible to have conflicting views about their moral meanings; but what about their ontological meaning? Consider the context of chapter 5 of Ephesians: the Apostle Paul is telling them to 'walk in love,' to avoid lechery and every impurity and wantonness and loose talk and wild laughing, and so on, and he forbids them to

over-indulge in wine, teaching them to obey one another in God; then he sketches the duties of a wife to a husband, while in chapter 6, he teaches the right relation between parent and child, servant and master. My point is this: 'whatsoever doth make manifest is light' explains why the children of light have the energy and obligation to expose the works of darkness; the words have this ethical and instructional intention."

Your perceptions are right but not your conclusion. You create a context; let me do the same and locate this passage from chapter five within the context of the whole Epistle. But let me first say this: I am not trying to prove a point but only indicating what I personally feel about it.

So: the Epistle is addressed to the people of Ephesus, a city widely known for its veneration of—and art devoted to—the goddess Artemis, a center of both magical practices and the producing of idols. From the *Acts of the Apostles,* we know of the great rebellion led by one Demetrios the Silversmith against the Christians of Ephesus whose teachings had greatly hurt the market for idols. Throughout the Epistle, I feel a secret contrast between, on the one hand, this soulless *business* of Ephesian paganism (represented by sculpture) and, on the other, the ancient figurative art of making God incarnate by and in the image (the art which, in time, becomes iconpainting). As a highly educated Jew, the Apostle could not help but be almost viscerally repelled by the idolatrous Ephesian statuary—but the city's ancient figurative and relatively more symbolic art, which was still far from supernaturalist essence, was for him more acceptable, for its light-generating technique approached both Scriptural teachings about the creating of the world and Platonic understandings about the generation of ideas—understandings themselves (according to Philo's tradition) close to Judaic theology by virtue of both their essential content and their historic interaction.

A great antithesis arises: the act of seeing opposes the act of touching in the same way the art of light opposes the art of darkness. The overwhelming *tactility* of pre-Christian pagan art is well known, a special link exists between this sense and paganism; and the Holy Fathers even more acutely see a special link between tactility (more than any other sense) and the place where purity is broken. All of these and related ideas the Apostle could not help but have in his mind (if only in some hidden corner of it)—nor could his Ephesian readers. For even when he is engaged in merely ethical instruction, he is holding in his mind this great image of illumined art defeating the fruitless business of darkness—

"You were going to point out the meaning of the Epistle's ethical teaching."

This is exactly what I am doing. For the supreme image of the great Artist creating by and in light "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph 1:6)—here is the image of the world as the whole house-building of God. And when the Apostle Paul talks, in the very beginning, about our being chosen in Christ "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4), and when he concludes with admonishing us to be children of the light, revealing to us concretely the living image of such an illumined childhood, then is not that immense process the very one the iconpainter replicates, in small, through fashioning the icon, beginning with the pre-imaging (i.e., outlining in gold the future images) and ending with those pictures of the illumined children radiating light shining in gold? By the way, you argued just before against the ontology of the Apostle's words, insisting on their moral meaning. I answer that the Church, in the highest sense, sees ethical morality as alien; and that if one wishes to speak in a Christian way about *behavior,* one must speak only ontologically and never moralistically and, above all, never legalistically. Seeing the ethical as alien distinguishes all of the Apostle's writing but especially this Epistle. But why do we even talk of this? Who better than the Apostle knew the emptiness

and arrogance of "the business of the Law," of trying to save oneself by morality? And after everything he had inwardly overcome, could he have ever proposed ethical rules *without* faith in Christ, i.e., without the ontological nourishment of Christ's fullness?

The Epistle to the Ephesians has three features that distinguish it from the other epistles. The first is the spiritual height of its content, along with a corresponding elevation of style and breadth of concept. St. John Chrysostom writes:

> The Apostle, they say, when he was teaching the people of Ephesus, was already entrusting them with the deepest truths of the Faith. For the Epistle is filled with the highest and most immense meditations; in it, he explains things he wrote about almost nowhere else....

The vision of our ceaseless blessing in Jesus Christ exalts the Apostle, and vivid feelings and ideas so abound within him that he hasn't the time to catch them in words. Thought flows irrepressibly into thought until they exhaust the whole subject that had inspired the saint. And every word multiplies into other words, for he seeks only to outline every conceivable subject and not to dwell specially on any one, endowing all with the vision wherein ideas flow in, through and as pure consciousness. Just in its content, then, and in its tone of voice, this Epistle stands to the other letters of the Apostle's the way the Gospel of St. John stands to the other three Gospels.

The second distinguishing feature of the Epistle directly arises from the first: universality. The Apostle gives a general description of essential Christianity: how, from the depths of ages, God chose to save us in His Son; how the Son of God came to earth and established this salvation; how all of us participate in this salvation; and how, given all this, we must live and act. He adduces no specific historical context for all this, holding that everything he says applies to everywhere that Christians live. There is only one distinction made, that between "we" (who are Jews) and "you" (who are Gentiles) who now, in alliance with the Jews, form the one body of God's holy church, the body that is the starting point

of all the Apostle's inspired contemplations. It is this universality that has led some to call the Epistle to the Ephesians a common Christian catechism.

The third feature is the complete absence of all empirical particularities concerning either the Apostle himself or the Ephesians. As Bishop Theophanes wrote: "The Apostle did not want to descend into ordinariness, so extraordinary were the contemplations he sustained in writing them down." The Epistle's intent lies in the hope that "God will give them the enlightened eyes of the heart." The Apostle desires above all that the Ephesians will be raised up—as far as possible for those on earth—into a clear vision of the divine order of things, the economy of salvation, for he wishes them to behold what he himself beholds; "and higher than the Apostle's vision, no one has ever seen nor ever will."

To attain this end, the Apostle tells in the first half of the mystery of salvation, and in the second he describes the growth of the Body of Christ and its vital life; and this second part is, in both its general meaning and its specific details, represented as concretely manifesting the ontology of salvation; and, as a golden background to everything, he sustains a stream of spiritual contemplations that, throughout the Epistle, make the empirical details of actual life seem to be further revelations of the saving ontology. Thus, in the case before us, we must understand the words 'whatsoever doth make manifest is light' not in the reinterpretations of moral rules; rather, their meaning, according to the Apostle, is determined wholly by the ontology of light.

With absolute exactness, the Apostle bears witness to the ontological reality of the other world, a world he beholds with his own eyes; and he above all desires that his own witness become a seed of contemplation for and in all believers. Thus, it is entirely natural that his partially articulated evidences of spiritual visions become the most exact formulas for expressing the meaning of that secondary evidence of the spiritual realm: i.e., the meaning of iconpainting